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KING PURPLE'S JESTER

Books for children by the same author:

THE SEASONS AND THE WOODMAN

FARMER JIM

THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF FARMER JIM



King Purple's Jester

By

D. H. CHAPMAN

Illustrated by

VIOLET M. MORGAN

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CHAPTER I

IF EVER YOU should visit the orphanage at Tritten (and, indeed, if ever you visit Tritten you dare not in politeness refuse) you will be struck by the many references to Leo the Great. There are statues and pictures of him in every corridor; every wall has a brass plate saying 'Leo Slept Here' or 'Here Leo Used to Wash', or 'This is Where Leo Supped'—or something like that. The Orphanage Trustees make quite a good income selling picture postcards of Leo, and so do the souvenir shops; and whenever a stranger mentions his name, the natives of Tritten will say: 'Of course you knew, didn't you, that Leo was a Trittenese?'

To call him The Great suggests that Leo was Emperor, King, or at least a Pope. But Leo was none of these things. Leo was Jester to Purple the Seventh, King of Patria. And Patria is a smallish kingdom halfway in size between the Kingdom of Prug, which encompasses it on the east side, and the Republic of Freesia, which helps keep its shape on the west. It lies entirely within the valley of the River Megrime—the Beautiful Blue Megrime, as it is called, whose waters if drunk too freely, they say, make you see imaginary leopards which keep changing their spots.

This is the story of Leo, and why he came to be known as The Great by the proud folk of Tritten, where Leo was born and bred.

They said of the boy Leo that he could laugh at anything—and so he could. As a few-weeks-old baby he

laughed at the matron who found him abandoned in a basket outside the orphanage front door. He laughed when the good priest christened him, for want of a better name, Leo Anonymous. He laughed when the orphanage sisters smacked him for laughing in school hours. He laughed at his fellow orphans, though never unkindly, for he also laughed at himself. And when he grew older and the trustees apprenticed him to Old Jacob the coach-builder, he laughed at Old Jacob's antiquated ways. And when Old Jacob, after two years, sent him back to the orphanage in despair, he laughed at being free to begin again. For two more years the orphanage sheltered him, trying in the meantime to settle him into some useful life's work. Then the matron, who had a soft spot in her heart for the cheerful lad, died. The one who succeeded her proved to be hard, unsympathetic, grotesque. One day, after hearing a personal lecture against his lack of seriousness, Leo made the mistake of laughing at her. Thereafter his days at the orphanage were few. It was no hard matter for the matron to find an excuse to be quit of him.

So one day Leo found himself again outside the orphanage front door, with a suitcase in his hand, a few coins in his pocket, and no ideas at all about tomorrow.

Luckily he had a friend who painted, and who said, 'I could squeeze you in for a few days until you find work, if you don't mind sleeping on the sofa.' Leo said he didn't mind, only he didn't want to put his friend out; but his friend said it wouldn't make any difference at all to him, really; the sofa was vacant, and somebody might as well use it.

Leo moved in at once, and began thinking hard what he might do to earn a living. It was no use asking people



A*

if they wanted his services. They only said no, but they'd bear him in mind, which came to exactly the same as saying, 'No, full stop'.

'Never mind,' Leo's friend remarked, 'something always turns up.' And Leo's friend honestly believed it, which was just as well, otherwise he would have given up art and trying to sell it.

It was the same friend who set Leo off on his career, since it was he who suggested that Leo should study the paper for jobs going begging. 'I've no use for newspapers usually,' said he, 'but you could but try the *Advertiser*.'

Whether or not Leo himself would have thought of it cannot be said; anyway, the credit for proposing the idea shall go to his friend. . . .

The *Tritten Advertiser* came out as a rule every day, but it advertised SITUATIONS VACANT and SITUATIONS WANTED only on Saturdays. This, said the Editor, prevented people rushing into situations they might later regret. Saturday advertising, however, gave applicants all Sunday to think matters over.

So on Saturday morning Leo hung about the news-agents awaiting delivery of the early edition. In the meantime he studied the cards pinned on the baize-covered board by the doorway. All sorts of notices could be stuck there for next to nothing a week. There were such things as: 'Room to Let. First Floor and Use of Bath', 'Wanted: a Clean Girl to look after Baby four mornings a Week', and: 'I Teach to you English, French Lessons, by Native Professor'. And tucked in between there'd be: 'Kitchen-hand wanted', or 'Smart Lad to learn Vegetable Trade'. Usually the cards were dusty and rolled up like autumn leaves,

although sometimes they were worth looking at: you never knew.

But today there was nothing that looked like a future for Leo, though he scanned them with care, up and down, several times. He was wondering whether to leave and call later when, *thump!* a large packet shot through the doorway, while a passing voice shouted: 'Hot from the press!'

'Drat that boy!' snapped the shopkeeper, shuffling round the counter to pick up the parcel. 'Why on earth can't he bring 'em in himself, 'stead of tossing 'em at a body like that? Too lazy to stop, I don't doubt, though he thinks 'tis being what he calls High-powered. Now what was it you wanted?' he went on, painfully untying the string knotted round the bundle. 'An *Advertiser*? Ah yes. Well, hold hard a minute, my old fingers aren't as deft as they were; and I'm too proud to cut it. There! One copy, all nice and ink-smelly. Two pennies—cheap at the price, well worth double. Thank you, and call again.'

On the way homewards Leo folded back the paper to page three and read while he walked. There was plenty of work going, though nothing he cared about. He had no wish to sell brooms from door to door, nor to learn chimney-sweeping, nor letter-copying. And he could not type, nor repair guns or watches. It began to look strongly as though he must wait another week.

Back indoors he lay down on his sofa and started again. 'WANTED: Bassoon player, Billiard-ball maker, Book-keeper, Cabinet-worker, Cloth-weaver, Coalheaver, Door-man, Draughtsman, Egg-packer, Fish-fryer . . .' and so on to 'Zoo keeper.' Nothing at all . . .

'Bother!' said Leo impatiently. And then he turned over a page, and there in a private corner, with a special kind of print and a small crown on top, he read this:



**BY ROYAL COMMAND
COURT JESTER WANTED**

A vacancy exists in the Royal Household for a Jester or Fool. Must be Ceaselessly Amusing and able to keep His Majesty in Fits. Good Opening for Right Sort of Fool. Apply on Thursdays and Fridays at the Palace, Pelt (Tradesmen's Entrance).

By Royal Command,

PURPLE REX.

'Whew!' gasped Leo, and ran to his friend. 'Look at this,' he exclaimed, 'and then tell me. Could I or could I not? A jester, making people laugh! I believe I could do it. At least I could try. I wish——.'

Suddenly he wanted, more than anything else on earth, to become the king's jester

Tomorrow would be Sunday — Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. Five days to go before he could apply at the palace. It seemed a horribly long time, with so little to do except go to the station and look up the Thursday trains to the capital.

'Though you could as well,' suggested his friend, 'go to the library and find out all you can about jesters.'

'A most clever idea,' Leo said, and went running off there and then.

'Jesters?' the ancient librarian mumbled. 'Ah, jesters. We should have some books about jesters, though just now I can't think where to lay hands on them. Not much demand, if you understand me. Though—wait, have you looked in the encyclopedia? No? Then you should find something in there. Volume nine, I surmise, which has everything in it from Jackal to Kilimanjaro.'

Leo settled himself at a table and found what he

needed. In olden times, he learnt, every court had its jester or fool, who attended the king for the purpose of keeping him entertained. His uniform was called motley, consisting of gay coloured breeches and tunic, with a cap set with bells on his head. He could be, said the book, as personal and rude to the king as he liked: such was known as Fool's licence. And the king took it mildly, as part of the game. (Very good, Leo thought.) Although sometimes, the account proceeded, a jester would take too many liberties, when the king might, and sometimes did, command his death. (Here Leo paused, and began wondering.)

There was a great deal more, about jesters who had become famous, and jesters who had done brave deeds, and the article finished by saying: 'The office of jester has long been out of fashion, except in the kingdom of Patria where the tradition continues unbroken.'

That night Leo dreamed that he and King Purple were waging a quarrel. The king kept repeating: 'You go too far, really you do!'—while Leo danced round him repeating, 'Fool's licence, fool's licence!' Then the king said, 'You die!' and began waving an axe round his head. At that moment Leo awoke, and it was a very ordinary Sunday morning in Tritten.

CHAPTER II

LEO WAS UP prodigiously early on Thursday, and although dawn had not yet struggled right through the steam and smoke, the station was full of Tritten folk waiting for the first train. Thursday was Cheap Day

Excursion day, which encouraged a lot of people to visit Pelt. They mostly had nothing to do there, but it seemed a good way of saving money. In the light of the oil lamps they looked cross and wary of each other, as if expecting to be elbowed to death when the train came in. Leo, in fact, was the sole cheerful passenger, and his spirits were so high that they rose above the thought that he might have to stand all the way.

'Don't know what you've got to be so happy about,' grumbled a little old lady at Leo's side. 'Can't think what they've done with the dratted thing, keeping us waiting long past the printed time in black and white!'

Then the train, which had been hiding all the time in a siding, shunted forward and stopped for its morning drink. 'Poop!' it said; then they turned off the pump and screwed down the brass cap on the boiler, and the train sidled into Platform 1 where Tritten awaited it.

'Third-class only!' shouted a porter, and all the doors flew open at once as the eager excursionists rushed for the corner seats. In one minute the Cheap Day Excursion was packed, while such doors as could slam, without injury to the standing passengers, were slammed. Then the engine drew a deep breath, leaned slightly forward, and they were off.

If it had chosen to, the Patria State Railway could claim to be the most out-of-date system in the civilized world. It had been through good times and bad times, and booms and slumps. Altogether the bad times outnumbered the good; and because there was never enough spare cash in the Railway Bank, nothing was ever renewed. So the engines and carriages ran till they dropped, and the Patria State Railway slowly wasted away.

Which suggests that of all trains the Cheap Day Excur-

sion came low in the list for comfort. This was so indeed, and all the way the groan of the wheels mingled with the groans of the passengers as they wriggled what comfort they could from the wooden seats.

Since Leo had politely let women and children go first, he had to stand all the way, compressed like a pulled-out Z between an overhanging sort of colonel and a lady with a parcel on her lap. Each time the train lurched he fell upon one or the other, and their black looks, added to the thick steamy air in the carriage, scarcely made for good fellowship.

The eighty-minute journey to Pelt took three hours, because the train stopped at every station for running repairs. Sometimes there would be passengers waiting, and sometimes not. On the whole it was better not, for as there was no room for as much as a small dog, it saved disappointment. So the train stayed shut, while officials ran up and down tapping the wheels for possible cracks in them and the driver scrambled over the engine with spanner and oilcan.

It was as well that today there was nothing seriously wrong, because Leo began to grow anxious about the time. True, the advertisement hadn't fixed an hour, but he did not want to find on arrival that someone had been chosen already. Though it still remained early, yet perhaps palace life began running at daybreak. You couldn't possibly know, knowing nothing at all of court habits.

But it wasn't in Leo to worry unnecessarily, and after one more look at his watch he resigned himself to the rest of the journey. Outside, the countryside strolled past, growing more and more colourful in the wakening daylight. Inside the rattling carriage it was getting hostile. Leo's standing neighbours to left and right kept shuffling back and forth, an inch at a time, searching for foot space.

In the far corner two ladies, whom he could not see properly, started to quarrel.

If I were a real jester, thought Leo, I'd make all those wretched people cheerful. I'd have them all laughing or singing. I'd make them all—'Sorry,' he said, as the train jumped a gap in the rails and tossed him against the lady with the parcel.

'People should look where they're going!' she snapped unreasonably, while all the seated passengers nodded agreement.

Really, thought Leo, looking along the scowling faces, something should be done. A song, perhaps, would cheer them. A catchy song, like the old favourite, 'Battle Hymn of the Men of Tritten'. Everyone would know that; it was Tritten's own anthem, going back to the days of old when the Freesians invaded Patria and laid siege to the old town.

Quietly at first, Leo hummed the chorus. '*High upon the ramparts the flag of Patria waved. "Tritten," quoth the burgomaster, "ne'er shall be enslaved".*'

The man on his right frowned darkly and went, 'Tck, tck!' Leo ceased humming and whistled a chorus instead. There was a dull silence from everyone, while Leo stared at the ceiling and began tapping his foot in time with the music.

The colonel cleared his throat harshly. He doesn't like it either, thought Leo. He was thinking of giving up when the colonel started to join in with a deep bass rumble. Fine! thought Leo, and sang the words a little louder:

*They came like locusts from the west, the angry
hordes of Freisia.*

*A million men to take one town—no task could have
been easier.*

*Courage, men of Patria; yield not to the invaders!
Let it boil, then pour the oil upon the cruel raiders!*

The colonel nodded his head up and down. ‘*Tumty tumty tum,*’ he sang, ‘*the flag of Patria waved. Tritten, tumty tumty pom, tumty tumty slaved.*’

Leo looked over his shoulder to see the colonel nodding lustily. He felt better now, and sang the second verse in a louder voice. The two quarrelsome ladies joined in the last line, then Leo’s neighbour added his voice, and by the end the carriage was practically quivering with harmony.

‘Splendid!’ the colonel said when it was over. ‘Sing us some more, my boy.’

So Leo sang them somé more old favourites, like ‘The Goose is Green’, and ‘Up the Magic Mountain’, and ‘The Jolly, Jolly Juniper’, and ‘Mother Martin’s Mackerel’, and ‘My True Love Has no Heart’. All the excursionists joined in now, and it was utterly friendly and melodic.

‘Now sing us a solo,’ suggested the colonel, who had overdone the last verse of ‘The Leopard’s Lament’, and ended in a reddish-purple fit of coughing.

So Leo gave them ‘The Jackanape’s Frolic’, which was a longish but very funny song about a monkey who learnt to smoke tobacco; and one day by mistake he filled his pipe with esparto-grass and choked himself to death.

On the last line the train stopped as if shot, and the station said ‘Pelt South, Drink Bullo for Breakfast’, so they were nearly there. The passengers began to fidget and stir and to cast their eyes up at the luggage racks, as if taking aim before snatching their baggage and rushing away.

‘That was well done, my boy,’ said the colonel. ‘You’ve made us all sorry the journey’s over. Quite magical of you. Tell me, are you a singer by trade?’

'No, sir,' answered Leo, 'I'm a jester.'

'A jester, eh? Who do you work for?'

'Well, sir, no one as yet. I should say, I hope to be a jester. I'm going to the palace now to offer my services. They want a new jester.'

'They do, eh?' the colonel said. 'What's wrong with old Jack?'

'Old Jack?'

'The king's jester. Bless me, why, I've known him since I was a lad. He's not ill, I hope?'

'I really don't know, sir,' said Leo. 'I only saw the advertisement.'

'Advertisement, eh? Perhaps old Jack's giving up. That'll be it. Why, he was getting ripe when I was a youngster. Do you know H.M.?'

'H.M., sir?'

'His Majesty. D'you know the king, I meant?'

'Oh, no, sir. I know no one at the palace.'

'H'm!' said the colonel. 'Better for you, in a way. The place is a madhouse most of the time. They're an odd lot. Knew 'em all once. You see, I used to be a pageboy to His Majesty.' He chuckled, and patted his stomach. 'Wouldn't think so now, to look at me, would you?'

'No, sir,' said Leo, who always spoke the truth unless it was likely to hurt people.

'Still, there it was. Ten years at court, then the army. Look here, young fellow, if you see old Jack, tell him from me you'll make a dashed good jester, see? Tell him I said so.'

'I certainly will, sir,' said Leo. 'Who shall I say told me?'

'Tell him Colonel—no.' The colonel dropped his voice. 'Tell him Young Jocko said so.' He chuckled again. 'Young Jocko, that's what old Jack used to call me,

because I was a proper little monkey. I still am at heart,' he added wistfully, 'though at my age one isn't supposed to show it.'

'Pelt Central,' a voice called, and the train with a thankful sigh emptied itself into the nation's capital city.

CHAPTER III

AS CAPITALS GO, Pelt was not a big city; but it was nine and a half times as big as Tritten, and this being Leo's first visit it seemed to him immense. Just outside the station he asked a porter the way to the palace. 'Straight down,' said the porter, 'third left and third right. You cannot escape it.'

'Thank you,' Leo answered.

'A pleasure,' the porter said, 'straight down, third left and third right. It looms over everything.'

'Thank you,' said Leo again.

'Not at all. Over everything and everybody. Looms,' said the porter, turning away.

Leo hurried down the main street, following the porter's directions. In less than five minutes he reached the great courtyard encircling the royal palace.

It was a vast, shabby building, built partly of white stone grown grey with dirt, and partly of grey stone turned black. You couldn't guess how old it was, for it had constantly been added to. The centre part, though, was the oldest. King Furius the Terrible, they said, had laid the foundations of that in the fourteenth century. His son, King Furius the Mild, built the western wing,

while the next monarch, Wayward the Wicked, added an eastern wing. From then on, each king altered the palace as it suited his fancy, some adding on and some casting off, until the time of King Omberg the Ominous, who impatiently called a halt to the business. But by then the worst harm had been done, and the palace settled down to being rambling; and a rambling palace is among the most confusing things on earth.

The courtyard was bounded by iron railings, with here and there a pair of gates guarded by sentries in boxes. The sentries wore purple and black uniforms and carried tall lances. Their shaggy beards made them look very fierce, and though they stood still, as if not caring about anything much, you felt they would be out of their boxes and jabbing and stabbing away at the slightest threat to their sovereign's peace.

At the moment there seemed to be nothing astir in the palace. Leo paused while he wondered how one entered. He noticed a plate fixed on the railings near the main gates, and thought it might help. But it only said: 'Warning. No Trespassing or Loitering. Penalty Ten Crowns. (Or you could be Imprisoned.) By Order.' Which didn't help him at all, though for fear of being a loiterer he hurried towards the nearest sentry-box. Something about the sentry's look made him stop short. Leo felt in his pockets for the scrap of paper torn out of the *Advertiser*. He was reading it slowly, when several deep grunts made him look up, and there was the sentry approaching him.

'Vivat Rex! Hi!' bellowed the sentry, 'what are you doing so near the king's person?'

Leo swallowed and blinked. 'Nothing—nothing harmful,' he stammered.

'The password, quick!' snapped the sentry.



'I—I—really, I meant no harm.'

'No harm—ha—no harm. They all say that. No harm—but never a password to prove it.' The sentry rattled his lance threateningly. 'Come now, while I count ten.'

What on earth should he say? Leo wondered. The sentry's behaviour completely addled him.

'One—two, one—two, left—right, seven—eight,' barked the sentry, and suddenly Leo heard the companion one marching towards them in time. He swung round on 'nine—ten' to find himself hemmed in.

'Oh, please——' he began.

'Silence!' the first sentry ordered. 'Silence! Vivat Rex —halt! What's the password?'

'I don't really know, but please——' Leo said.

'Shut up!' the sentry replied. 'I wasn't talking to you.'

'The password', the second sentry answered quietly, 'is "Peardrops for Permanence". And I'll trouble you to change boxes, because you said I wouldn't remember. You see,' he explained to Leo, 'my chum here has got a bit cockahoop lately because I forgot the password three times this week. Said I was getting old in the head. So I said I'd prove I wasn't, provided he'd give me his box if I was right. So I took special pains to remember, with what happy results you have just witnessed. So move over, old cocksure, and kindly allow me. Vivat Rex!'

'Oh, Vivat yourself!' said the first sentry peeishly, as he made to march over. 'But tomorrow I get it back. It's only for today, mind.'

'What's wrong with your own box?' asked Leo.

'Nothing wrong, as a matter of fact,' said the second sentry. 'But this one has a radio in it. Hark!' He plunged his hand into the roof, and the whole box trembled with organ music. 'See?' he said, turning it down several degrees.

'It's wonderful,' Leo said, 'but couldn't you all have them?'

'Oh, no, no, no—think of the noise. Besides, only the senior sentry has the right: it's traditional. That's my friend there, the one you were chatting to. What were you chatting about, by the way? Don't mind my asking, only I get so curious when I see my friend hobnobbing with strangers. We don't find many to talk with as a rule. It's a lonelyish life, though it has its compensations in cold weather, when you can pop in the box for a snuggle.'

'As a matter of fact,' Leo said, 'we weren't talking about much. I mean, I hadn't got as far as explaining what I wanted. You see, I was going to ask where I have to go about the jester's job.'

'Oh, the jester,' the sentry said with interest. 'Are you going to be the jester? Now that'll be very nice for my friend and me, because we like a good laugh now and then, and we'll all be working for the same firm, in-a manner of speaking. When are you going to begin?'

'Not so fast!' Leo laughed. 'I've not been picked yet. I'm just going for an interview.'

'Oh, well, I dare say they'll have you all right. Well, you go that way.' The sentry laid a hand on Leo's shoulder and waved his lance in a half-circle. 'Right round the railings until you come to the back. Then you'll see a big gate, which will be open. If not, you ring the bell. The new jester—how interesting.'

'Not yet,' Leo reminded him. 'By the way,' he asked, turning back: 'do you happen to know if any others have applied for the job?'

'About two hundred,' the sentry said, 'so I've been told.'

'Oh!' said Leo, his heart sinking. Then he almost ran in case he'd be too late even to be considered. The

railings seemed to go on for ever; towards the back of the palace they were deplorably rusty and broken. In places, indeed, whole sections were missing, and the gaps had been patched up with barbed wire and old iron bedsteads. Evidently King Purple was poorer than kings are supposed to be—or he could be merely of an economical nature. The whole courtyard, too, Leo noticed, was matted with weeds and herbs.

He found the big gate at the back labelled 'Tradesmen's Entrance', and a white board which read 'Staff Vacancies: Watch This Board'. Pinned to it were pieces of cardboard saying '2 Serving Wenches.—Spit-turner.—Jester.—Assistant Comptroller of the Privy Purse'.

Just inside the yard a white arrow on a stick pointed towards a sort of outhouse, which was full of clamour. Leo entered, to find the room crowded with people sitting on benches in groups. The nearest consisted of chattering girls in white dresses; they were all prospective serving-wenches. Next to them there were young lads, some of whom now and then wove slow circles in the air, as if keeping their arms in practice. Thirdly, a dozen elderly men, dressed in black pinstripe suits, sat aloofly with cheque-books sticking out of their pockets.

Leo had barely time to take this in, when a man who didn't seem to fit in anywhere bore down and said: 'What's yours?'

'Jester,' answered Leo, and was hurried away to the far end of the room.

'There, sit down,' he was told, '—if you can find a seat, that is.'

It was easier said than done. Jesters of all sorts filled the many benches, and after giving Leo one glance apiece, they all looked away without the slightest attempt to move up. So Leo stood awkwardly, feeling forlorn and

hopeless. For what could he hope, in the face of so much expert competition? Most of his rivals seemed experienced men: several, in fact, were dressed for the part, in their many-coloured motley and tinsel. If he went away now, there would still be every type to choose from: fat jesters, thin jesters, old ones and fresh ones, tall and short. Some were in red and green, others in purple and gold; some sported six or seven colours, others were in ordinary clothes.

They were as diverse as a bunch of wild flowers, as mixed as a packet of broken biscuits. All they had in common was the look of black gloom on their faces. Many had already waited a long time, and evidently most expected to wait a great while longer. The far-sighted ones, Leo noticed, had brought something to eat.

'What is happening?' he whispered to his neighbour, a fully dressed clown who was resting as much as he could of himself on the edge of a bench.

'Interviews, one at a time,' the clown answered. 'At this rate it may last several weeks.'

Leo shifted on to the other foot and began counting the waiting numbers. Supposing it took ten minutes each, they would finish the row in twenty-times-ten. Two hundred minutes: say three hours and a half. It was awful, and there might be others to come yet. . . .

'Perhaps some will drop out,' he whispered to the clown.

'Perhaps,' said the clown briefly. 'But not me. I'm well prepared—see?'

From the baggy folds of his pantaloons he drew out several neat packages having the special shape that sandwiches fit into. They were carefully labelled, and the clown handed them to Leo to read.

'Be prepared!' said the clown. 'Look.'

I have a strongish sort of hunch (Leo read)
I'll have to wait till after (and in huge letters, on a line
to itself)

LUNCH.

'Like it?' the clown asked. 'Here's the next.'

*In case they won't have got to me,
I need not starve for lack of*

TEA.

'Good, don't you think?' remarked the clown. 'Here's
the next.'

*Though others quit, I mean to stick fast.
Enclosed is Friday morning's*

BRICKFAST.

'Of course, it should be Breakfast really,' explained the
clown, 'only it's such a tiresome word to rhyme with. Let
me show you the others.'

'Oh, please don't let me put you to trouble,' Leo said,
feeling uncomfortably hungry already. 'Do you really
expect to hang about for so long?'

'Longer, if anything,' answered the clown. 'Judge for
yourself. Hullo, things are moving.'

Over the heads of the seated group Leo saw a door
open, and there was the king's jester ready for the next
in turn. He was lean, but he carried himself with an air
that gave dignity to his orange and purple garments.
There's a real jester, Leo thought with some envy.

For a moment the jester looked over the crowd, then he
said rather wearily: 'Who's next?'

Immediately a dozen of those in front leapt to their
feet with cries of 'I', 'Me', 'I am', 'No, me, me!' It looked
as if a fight was fast brewing, for the shovelling and
jostling became more than a way to attract attention.
Then the second row grew tired of sitting still, and one

or two tried to improve their positions by wheedling a place on the front bench while the true owners stood up to argue.

But a sharp word from the jester brought them to order.

'And now,' he said quietly, 'one at a time. Who is next?'

All at once he noticed Leo, the only one standing. 'Well, young man,' he called out, while heads turned to find out who was being addressed: 'Why haven't you found a seat?'

'If you please, sir, there's no more room.'

'Nonsense!' the jester replied, not unkindly. 'There's enough to spare, if some of the others cared to sacrifice a little.' As he spoke, the whole body of candidates seemed to swell sideways as if to conceal any spare inch of bench. 'No more room?' he asked, with his eyebrows raised. Several heads shook.

'Very well,' said the jester. 'But we can't have him standing all day, now, can we? You'd better come in straight away,' he told Leo.

What a shrinkage there was then, and how eagerly each benchful made room! And how angry the looks as the jester led Leo away!

'That'll teach 'em!' the jester said grimly, closing the door behind them. They were in a small room with three chairs and a table to furnish it. On the table lay a copy of the *Pelt Times*, and an open notebook decorated with scribbled pigs.

'Sit down,' the jester said, 'take your choice.'

He himself sank into the most comfortable chair, and eased off his long-pointed slippers. At close quarters he looked very much older, having a loose-fitting face and grey hair. He let out a long sigh, and turned to Leo.

'Well, go on,' he said wearily. 'Make me laugh.'

The demand caught Leo unprepared. Not one riddle or joke could he think of.

'Well?' went on the jester, after a silent pause.

'Well,' Leo echoed. Really, this was far too sudden. 'I can't think of anything,' he blurted out. 'Not on the spur of the moment, like this.'

The jester shrugged his shoulders. 'Then why did you come, if just to look glum?' he asked.

'I came to be interviewed; to talk things over.'

'Gracious me,' said the king's jester slowly, 'what's the point of an interview, if not to show what you can do? A jester's job is making laughter: that's the first thing—the rest comes after.'

'Yes, I know,' Leo answered; 'I understand. But I do know a lot of jokes and songs, really I do. And I can make people laugh, honestly I can.'

'Very well. We'll let that pass for the moment. If you kept your mouth shut and didn't say a word, you'd be better than most of the others I've heard.' The jester sighed. 'What a day!' he went on, 'worn out already, and look what's still in store. Do you play any instrument?'

'The guitar,' Leo said, 'fairly well.'

'Not the flute, I hope. The king dislikes flutes, and all players he shoots. He doesn't really,' the jester added, noticing Leo's surprise, '—not shoot 'em, I mean. I only said that because it made a jingle. Flutes, shoots—see? You must excuse my talking in rhymes at times, but I can't help it. It's part of a jester's stock-in-trade. I can't shake it off, even in private: it's a sort of impediment in my speech.'

'I don't mind it a bit,' Leo answered. 'Should I have to learn to do it?'

'It's up to you. But you're not the king's jester yet. You've not even told me what experience you've had.'

'As a jester, you mean? Actually, none, but—'

'No previous experience?' the jester said. 'My dear young fellow, and you come here in the face of all those hardened comedians outside? Why, it takes years of practice and training. And you come here knowing naught of it—whatever made you thought of it?'

'I needed a job,' Leo explained, 'and I thought I knew it would appeal to me, and so I came to try my luck.'

'Understandable,' the jester said, 'but fruitless—like an apple tree in a school playground. Still, you mustn't think it doesn't pain me to refuse you. But, of course, only the best is good enough for the king.'

'So there's no hope for me, then?' asked Leo, realizing that instant how very much store he had set by it.

'No hope, I'm afraid,' the jester said, and though Leo felt him to be sympathetic, he could almost have wept. 'It must be sad being out of work,' went on the jester, seeing Leo's downcast face. 'I was wondering whether there isn't some other job here in the palace. Do you know anyone in court? They can be helpful, in a sort. Of way, that is.'

Leo shook his head. 'Nobody,' he confessed—and then: 'Wait, though, I kind of know Colonel—no, Young Jocko, I mean.'

The jester sat up with a jerk.

'Young Jocko? You know Young Jocko? Why on earth didn't you say so before? Why, any friend of Young Jocko's is a friend of mine.' He grew very excited. 'A friend of Young Jocko—fancy that, now. Shake hands: how are you? How's he? In fact, how are you both? Well, well: he actually knows Young Jocko—though of course, he's not young any more. Old age creeps on, and everyone

touches. With some it creeps, with others it rutes. But Young Jocko—oh dear, dear, dear!' The jester's eyes screwed up, and for no reason that Leo could see he laughed and laughed.

'I was just thinking', the jester said, 'of the time he dressed up as a Moroccan prince and had the court bowing and scraping over him. Laugh?—you should have seen the chamberlain's face when he found out. Oh dear, oh dear!' The jester went into another fit. 'And then,' he said, 'then—oh, this is killing me!—that time when the queen dowager of Prug was on a visit, and Young Jocko pulled away her chair just as she sat down to the state banquet. I thought I'd die, and there was the king trying to keep a straight face—how he disliked the old girl!—and then Young Jocko apologizing and saying it was an unforeseen accident; and asking could he make amends by helping her up. And then—oh, I shouldn't go on, for I'll choke—then, when she'd smoothed and settled herself to be seated, whoops! Young Jocko pulled her chair away again.'

The jester spluttered so much by now that Leo felt alarmed. Though he could not feel as amused by the story as the jester himself, it was hard not to join in. For a time they chuckled and spluttered together; then the jester subsided with an exhausted wheeze.

'Oh,' he said, 'poof! . . . Whoo! . . . Tch! . . . Lad,' he said, 'you've made me laugh more than I've done in years. Tchoof! . . . If you can do the same to the king, you'll not be letting me down. Pfool! . . . Can you start work on Monday?'

And before Leo could collect his thoughts the jester was ushering him out by the back way and shaking good-bye with both hands.

CHAPTER IV

ON MONDAY LEO again stood in Tritten station, awaiting the train that wasn't a cheap day excursion. He had a one-way ticket and he travelled first-class because it was a fitting way to celebrate a position at court. All the clothes he possessed were strapped into a travelling rug, and round his neck he had slung his guitar with gaily coloured tassels hung from it. Though nervous in patches he felt happy and excited. This was his day, and the sun shone to prove it.

Although the calendar did not allow it to be spring just yet, Leo could scarcely tell the difference as he stepped into the sunlight at Pelt. The very air smelt good and helpful and the city felt friendly. This time there was no need to ask the way, and the palace no longer mystified him. The two sentries stood outside their boxes as they did the last time; only this time they gave Leo a rattling salute.

Once more he followed the railings to the back premises. Today there were few people about, and he was hard put to find someone to lead him to the jester's chamber. Old Jack sat alone eating a sandwich and reading a comic paper. 'Come in,' he said through a mouthful of sardine and lettuce. 'Sit down and eat, or have you eaten?'

'Not yet,' said Leo, 'but I'm not really hungry.'

'Nonsense, you must eat. We all must. Nothing leads so much to flummox as going about with empty stomachs.' He stretched out his arm and tugged at a frayed silken bell-rope. 'That should bring someone up in no time,' he remarked. 'But it won't. They're an indolent lot, the

palace domestic staff. Make yourself comfortable while I finish reading the serial. Do you mind?’

He busied himself with the back page while Leo glanced about the room. It would be his room, he supposed, when Jack left. Well, it was comfortable enough, but simple. In the corner there was a divan bed, covered in a purple spread, with various cushions thrown about. Near the foot stood a washstand, with a thick china bowl, a chipped water-jug, a soapdish which didn’t match, and a jam-jar with toothbrushes in it. Then there was a mahogany wardrobe, an oak chest of drawers, a small table, some chairs and a bookshelf. The bookshelf was crowded with the jester’s textbooks. Leo read some of the titles: *An Hundred Merrie Tales, Japes, Jokes and Jests, The Jester’s Companion, Larks for the Young and the Not so Young, Simple Practical Jokes, Riddles-us-ree, How to Make the Party Go.*

‘Ha!’ said Jack suddenly, folding up the paper; ‘not so good this week. I wasn’t at all convinced with the reasons they gave for the camel’s pneumonia. And what was Larry doing in the Turkish bath, when the last we heard of him was in a submarine? And where did the witch leave the cormorant’s egg? Do you know?’

‘I’m afraid I don’t,’ Leo said, quite bewildered.

‘No matter,’ the jester said. He pulled the bell-rope again. ‘You always have to ring three times,’ he explained. ‘It’s best to start early in the day.’ He stood up and stretched himself while the bells in his cap gently tinkled. ‘It’s one of the many things you have to learn. Shall I show you your room in the meantime?’

‘Why, yes, please. Shall I take my things with me?’

‘Yes, you might as well,’ said Jack. ‘No—leave them for the servants to bring. No—on second thoughts, it’s quicker to do it yourself. Come with me.’

For the next few minutes Leo felt utterly lost in a maze of corridors. They passed room after room, some with labels on the door, others not. Every now and then the jester turned left or right, along passages, through curtained arches, up stairs and down. I shall never find my way about, Leo thought desperately. Then they clattered up a narrow flight without a stair carpet, and along a narrow whitewashed corridor, and the jester opened the very last door.

'This is your room,' he said. 'It's not too luxurious, but please don't be furious. Till a larger room's ready, it at least means a beddy. And all meals free for nothing.'

It was not an inviting room, not the sort of room Leo connected with palaces. It was small, badly lit, and with barely enough furniture to call it furnished. Still, until something better offered itself it would have to do.

'Hm,' Leo said, 'shall I unpack now?'

'Come back and eat first,' the jester suggested; 'then we'll go to the tailor and try on your costume—I chose it myself. And then, well, if there's nothing more urgent you can settle yourself in.'

Under the jester's guidance Leo spent a prodigiously busy afternoon. First they visited the tailor (whose full title was Outfitter and Breeches Maker to the Royal Household) where Leo tried on the costume chosen for him. It was black, silver and purple and looked extremely smart. And although it sagged a bit here and there and was big enough for two people to share, the tailor said he'd soon fix that. 'That's a very fine costume,' he said through a mouthful of pins, and Leo turned round and round in front of the mirror and felt the same.

From the tailor they went to the Security Guard whose business it was to ensure that Leo wasn't a spy, or a bomb-



thrower, or a treason-talker, or an anarchist, or in any way a Designer Against the King's Person. He did this by questioning Leo about his past life and activities and by giving him several forms to fill in. They included questions like: 'Have you ever been arrested for (a) disturbing the peace, (b) driving dangerously, (c) high treason?' and 'Do you think Patria is the Most Wonderful Country in the World?' Beside each was a dotted line and the words 'Yes' and 'No'; and you had to write X against one or the other, but not both. Then they added them all up, and if you had more enough of one than the other you were all right. Leo gained quite a high score, so they went on to taking his fingerprints. He had to place each finger on an inky pad and impress it on a shiny white card. To complete the investigation they should have taken his photograph, but there was no film to be found. 'Never mind,' said the Security Guard, 'I shall remember your face.' Then he said, 'Well, that's all, I think. You'll do.'

Then off they went to the palace doctor, stopping at the nearest bathroom to wash the ink off Leo's fingers. 'Everyone has to have a medical examination,' explained the jester, pushing open the door of a room marked SURGERY.

Inside it was like an alchemist's treasure house, with racks and shelves laden with bottles, retorts, test-tubes and oddly shaped glassware. The number of tables, chairs and hospital beds made it difficult to move without knocking something over; you had constantly to draw in your stomach and slide between them sideways.

At the far end of the room they espied the royal physician. He was crouched over a gas-burner, cooking together a number of coloured liquids. He looked distinguished in a weary sort of way, and he was clearly

rather cross, for he kept muttering grumbling phrases to himself.

'Oh, hullo,' he said, without smiling at either of them. 'Forty-four years of solid experiments, and I *still* haven't invented anything. It's too tiresome!'

'Bad luck, Doc,' said the jester; 'but we all have our burdens to bear. Yours is experiments, mine is the king. It wears out our patience like any old thing. But be a kind Doc and look to this young man, will you? I'll come back in half an hour and take him off your hands.'

By the time the examination ended nearly a full hour had passed, for the physician was both thorough and slow. He looked at Leo's tongue, he felt Leo's pulse, he tapped Leo's chest, he listened to Leo's heart, he made Leo say 'Ninety-nine' while he plied his stethoscope all over Leo's back. Then he shone a torch in Leo's eyes and said, 'Look over there', and struck him below the kneecap to see if it made him kick in the way it should. After every test he scribbled a note on a special form with a crown stamped upon it. Finally he said, 'How do you feel?'

'Very well, thank you,' said Leo.

'So you ought. I can't find a thing wrong with you.'

'Congratulations,' said the jester who had just come in. 'Now for some tea.'

Once again they wandered through the network of corridors which seemed without number. If left to himself, Leo thought, it would take him a week to find Jack's room or his own. Never did they seem to walk the same way twice; every passage looked new to him. Now and then they met servants or palace officials popping in and out of rooms or padding back and forth on the well-trodden carpets. The jester knew them all by name. 'That's the Lord Privy Seal,' he would mutter; 'That's

the Royal Economist', or 'That's the newest pageboy, a cheeky ill-bred ragamuffin!'

Leo asked whereabouts the royal family lived. 'In the main block of the palace,' Jack answered, 'they inhabit the two floors below this.'

'And when——' Leo asked (he tried to sound casual) 'when shall I see the king?'

'Certainly not today. He has a banquet tonight and he always likes to rest beforehand. But you'll see the old fellow soon enough. Maybe tomorrow.'

Old fellow! indeed, Leo thought. What a proud thing it was so to know the king that you could speak of him as old fellow! It seemed, for the moment, the height of ambition. To think that he hadn't even seen the king, except in photographs, and tomorrow he would stand in the royal presence as a member of the palace staff. It was an impressive thought.

They were back in the jester's room, where Jack rang the bell for the first time. He yawned. 'Five o'clock,' he said, 'and I'm tired already. Yet I shall have to be on duty half the night at the wretched banquet.'

The very idea of a banquet filled Leo with excitement. He wondered if the king often gave them, and whether he'd always be expected to attend. He hoped so sincerely, although Jack didn't seem excited at the prospect. He didn't even seem pleased.

'Banquets, feasts, junketings,' exclaimed the jester with another yawn; 'what's the good of 'em all? Too much to eat, too much to drink; a lot of talk, and no time to think. Oh, I get so weary, weary keeping the king amused. Oh, but I shall be glad when you can take over from me.'

'How much longer do you expect to stay?' Leo asked.

The jester gave the bell-rope its second pull. 'About a

month, I daresay. I reckon I can teach you all you need to know in a month. And then I leave you to your own devices, sincerely hoping there won't be no crises.'

'I hope so too,' said Leo.

'Well, I'll teach you all I can, and you can pick up the rest from watching me. Tea, Carlo,' he said to the footman who poked his head round the door.

'Ss!' said the footman, withdrawing his head.

'That's Carlo,' explained Jack. 'He hates waiting on anybody who hasn't a title in front of his name, or at least six letters after it. As for attending a mere jester—why, he barely condescends to talk, except in hisses and grunts.'

Presently the door opened again with a thumping of knees, and Carlo brought in the tea. It was very severe, comprising only a chipped china teapotful, a few lumps of sugar in a jam-jar, milk and hot water, and heavy scones lightly brushed with butter.

'No jam or cake, Carlo?' asked the jester.

'Monday,' the footman said.

'Oh yes, economy day,' explained Jack when the footman had gone. 'Every Monday they cut down the food, all to save money.'

'Isn't the king rich?' asked Leo.

The jester shrugged. 'We none of us really know. From the tumbledown look of the palace and everything in it, you'd say not. But we believe—and sometimes the Controller of the Royal Pocket Money hints as much—that he saves more than he spends. We think he's collecting enough to leave to the princesses in case Prince Florizel dies and the kingdom passes to that arch-villain King Decimal. If it did the poor girls would be penniless.'

'King Decimal?' said Leo, pausing between mouthfuls of damp scone. 'King Decimal of Prug, do you mean? What does he have to do with it?'

'Everything, of course,' answered Jack as he squinted down his nose at a piece of string he had pulled out of his mouth. 'What *do* they make these things of?' he demanded. 'Everything,' he repeated. 'Don't you know about the Royal House of Patria?'

'I know it consists of the king, the queen, the prince, the princesses and the queen-mother.'

'No, no, not that. It's the succession I'm talking of—who comes next after King Purple dies?'

'Everyone knows that,' said Leo. 'Prince Florizel, of course.'

'Of course,' echoed Jack. 'And who next?'

'I suppose Princess Amnesia; she's the eldest.'

'Wrong!' said Jack.

'Princess Albina, then,' corrected Leo uncertainly.

'Wrong again. Have you heard of the Salic law?'

'Um, well, yes,' Leo said, hoping the jester wouldn't question him too deeply about it.

'The Salic law says', explained Jack in a schoolmasterish sort of way, 'that no woman shall succeed to the throne of a country. And the Salic law applies to Patria. So if anything happens to Prince Florizel, the crown passes on King Purple's death to King Decimal of Prug, who as you ought to know is King Purple's cousin.'

'So Patria and Prug become one country,' Leo put in. 'I say, that'll make Freesia look small, won't it?' He smiled at the idea.

But the jester looked shocked. 'Do you know what you're saying, lad?' he asked. 'Our glorious Patria ruled by King Decimal? The thought's unthinkable—why, it's . . . it's practically treasonable!'

'Oh dear, I'm so sorry,' Leo hastily said. 'I meant no such thing. But there's always Prince Florizel, isn't there?'

'Not always, if you know what I mean, which is that you can never be sure, and the prince isn't supposed to be too strong. *Not* that we don't think Queen Madge is largely to blame, the way she likes to spoil him. *What a difficult woman she can be, to be sure!*' Jack gave a weary sigh. 'But that you'll find out for yourself. So much to find out and so much to learn; it makes a man scarcely know which way to turn.'

Then the footman came in again. 'Ss!' he said. 'Steward says remember the banquet's been changed to an hour earlier.'

'Oh, so it has,' said the jester. 'Well, Leo, I'll have to be leaving you. If I were you I'd get unpacked and go to bed early. I'll have supper sent up to you; you won't want to sup with the others until I can introduce you. Get a good sleep, and tomorrow morning I'll take you to see the king. If you want anything, you just have to ring. There's no harm in trying. And now let's be flying.'

CHAPTER V

WHAT WITH THE excitements of today, and the thought of actually meeting the king tomorrow, Leo didn't expect to sleep at all. But he did, beautifully, and he slept until a maid brought him breakfast in bed. 'Here's your breakfast, and it's ten o'clock,' she said; and Leo, who couldn't possibly have known in his sleep how late it was, gobbled it down so as to be ready for the jester.

He had plenty of time to wash and dress, for Jack did

not appear until eleven. 'Hullo there,' he said cheerfully; 'early to bed and late to rise keeps the sun from out of your eyes. Well, are you ready to meet His Sleeping Majesty?'

'Quite ready,' said Leo. 'But isn't he up yet?'

'Not nearly. He sleeps like a log after banquets. But he has to wake up some time, and they like me to do it because I'm never alarmed by his tempers.'

Leo noticed the jester's clean suit which was different from yesterday's—rather more gay perhaps. Then he looked down at his own workaday clothes. 'Are these all right,' he asked, 'or should I wear my—er—my uniform too, if it's ready?'

'You're all right,' Jack assured him. 'Come just as you are. Don't say too much, and don't mind what he says.'

There was quite a bustle in the corridors at this time of day. People in livery rushed to and fro carrying papers, and housemaids both standing and kneeling plied dusters and brooms. The jester guided Leo towards the main block of the palace, which was more richly carpeted. In passing he waved towards a door which had a crown painted on it with FLORIZEL P. done in gold paint.

'Prince Florizel's apartments,' Jack said. 'I expect he's asleep still. He's the world's laziest highness.'

Soon after he nodded towards another door with two coronets on it.

'The princesses' room,' he said. 'Now, down the stairs and we're nearly there.'

The staircase opened out into the widest corridor of all. It had a purple carpet and purple wallpaper, and each door was shrouded in purple velvet hangings. Leo didn't need to be told that here were the king's chambers. The place looked and felt royal—royal purple for King Purple (but whether the colour took its name from the first King

Purple, or the king from the colour, it is too long ago to say).

'The queen's bedroom,' said Jack with a jerk of his thumb, 'the king's bathroom, the king's dressing-room, and—behold! the king's bedroom.'

They stood before a pair of curtains, each with a crown of gold needlework fashioned upon it. The jester drew them back and motioned to Leo to open the doors. Very cautiously Leo turned the gilt knob. 'Go on in,' said the jester; 'don't be afraid.'

Leo found himself in an enormous room, but it was too dim to see much because the curtains were drawn. The jester picked his way expertly through the furniture, and let in the daylight with a clatter of ropes and rings.

It certainly *was* a huge bedroom. It needed to be to take in the gigantic bed flanked by four posts which supported a canopy. But it managed this comfortably, leaving room for the many great wardrobes and dressing-tables, tables, chairs, stools and hassocks, writing-desks, tallboys and so on. Most of the furniture looked antique and heavy, and dreadfully expensive.

So this is the king's bedroom, Leo thought, gazing enraptured from the deep Persian carpet to the silky wallpaper with all sorts of natural history on it; and from there to the far-off ceiling and the spreading chandelier which looked to be studded with candles, only they were actually electric lights with imitation grease. 'Oh, it's magnificent,' he muttered under his breath. It was scarcely believable that he was still Leo, and that Leo was actually in the most private room of His Most Gracious Majesty King Purple the Seventh.

In his wonderment he almost forgot that the king was there too. But then he saw Jack shaking the pillow at the corner farthest from him, and the ensuing grunt told him

that somewhere amid the rumpled waste of bedclothes lay his sovereign.

'Go away!' came a muffled voice. 'Leave me *alone*, I command you!'

With a wink at Leo, Jack went on shaking.

'Show a leg, there,' he said briskly, '—up, up, up!'

'Oh, *please*—'

'Very well; I'll count ten. One, two, three . . .'

The bedclothes heaved, and from the far corner of the bed Leo met the eyes of the king.

'Who's that?' the king snapped, his mouth falling open.

Quickly Leo bowed his head and fell on one knee. It was, he believed the proper thing to do. Even in his night-gown there was something austere and regal about the king, although of course he looked less kingly at the moment than he did in his photographs.

As he gazed at a spot on the carpet, Leo heard the jester say, 'Don't excite yourself, Nuncle. I've told you about him already.'

But the king sounded still out of sorts. 'I will *not* have you bringing in strangers before I've even done my hair. I will *not*, I will *not*! Where is he? Quick, hand me my crown. Now, where is he?'

'Get up, Leo', called Jack and Leo stood humbly to attention.

The king sat upright in bed, and now he was wearing his visitors' crown.

'Speak up, boy; who are you?' he demanded.

'If it please your majesty,' Leo began. The phrase had made itself up without his trying.

'It's Leo,' interrupted the jester. 'Your new jester, Nuncle.'

'He's very young,' said the king.

'What of it?' said Jack. 'I was young once, but never



too young to begin. We've all got to be young at some time or another. Even you, you antique old majesty, were a stripling once.'

The jester's familiar manner took Leo aback, although he had expected some sort of liberty. But Jack—really, he seemed to have no respect for the king at all! There he was, talking as though it might be to a child, and the king seeming not to mind.

'Have you lost your tongue, boy?'

'No, sire.' Leo wondered how soon he might start taking liberties too.

'Well, speak out. What's the use of a jester who's dumb?'

'He could play funny tunes on the organ, if you had an organ,' said Jack. 'And don't snap at him like that, Nuncle. He's very new, and he hasn't ever met a king before, and you'd be uncomfortable too if you were in his place. So listen to me: you're going to like Leo, and you're going to be nice to him when I'm gone, or I shall stand outside the palace all day playing the flute. Now, sit still while I sing you a wakey-up song, and then you must get up.'

The jester struck an attitude with his hand on his heart, and began to sing:

*The morning sun stands in the sky.
Now bats and owls to bed do hie.
If you don't rise I can't see that
You're better than an owl or bat.*

How different Jack seemed, thought Leo, now that he was actually on the job that meant his livelihood. He was like an actor playing a part, quite unlike the Jack Leo had grown to know. Away from the king he behaved like an ordinary human being, whereas in the king's

presence he put on this brave, carefree, swaggering manner. This Jack, Leo supposed, was the only sort of Jack the king knew: the king's Jack and his were entirely different people. I suppose I shall be like that, Leo thought.

There was a rattle at the door, and a pair of high voices called, 'Yoo-hoo!'

The door opened slightly. 'May we come in? Happy morning!'

Leo turned and saw two young ladies bounce in. He knew them at once from their newspaper pictures: the king's radiant daughters, Princess Amnesia and Princess Albina.

They looked oddly alike, although Princess Amnesia was dark, while the other had white hair and pink eyes. Which was not to say Princess Albina was old: in fact, she was born with white hair, and in fact she was a year younger than her sister. And although they were no longer children, you could scarcely call them grown-up. In brief, they were plump, jolly girls.

'Ooh!' Amnesia said, looking at Leo, 'who's the new young man? Present him to us, quickly, quickly!'

'This is Leo, your father's new jester,' said Jack, and introduced him to each in turn. Leo bowed very gravely, and the princesses shook him heartily by the hands at the same time.

'Ooh, Daddy,' said Princess Albina, 'such fun. Lady Boozle is giving a fancy dress ball on the thirteenth, and we are both invited, and Florizel if he's well enough, and Mamma says she supposes it's all right, and Amnesia is going as a goose-girl, the silly thing, and I am going as a goddess, only I can't decide if it'll be the Goddess of Spring or the Goddess of Love. Won't it be a lark?'

'Yes, yes,' said the king rather impatiently. 'And now,'

he said firmly, ‘will you all go away—and leave me to think in peace.’

‘Oh, all right, you grumpy old majesty,’ said Albina. ‘Come on, Amnesia. Are you coming too, young man?’

‘I’ve got him in hand,’ Jack assured her. ‘And as for you, Nuncle, no more dozing off. Remember the awful thing that happened to the King of Toothless who would never get up, don’t you?’

‘No,’ said the king, sitting up and looking anxious: ‘what happened?’

‘Ah,’ answered the jester waggishly, ‘I’ll tell you later.’

‘No, no; tell me now. What did happen?’

‘They let him sleep right through his birthday celebrations.’

‘Is that all?’ the king remarked, as he slowly slid into the depths of the bed again. ‘I don’t call that awful, not when you’ve had as many birthdays as I have.’ He sighed. ‘Now leave me alone, there’s a good Jack, and take the young man—what’s his name?—with you.’

As soon as they were out of the king’s presence, the jester became his real self again. ‘Well, that’s your new master,’ he said to Leo when the princesses had left them in the corridor: ‘difficult at times, obstinate, touchy—but on the whole you can’t help liking him. Now we’ll call on the tailor.’

Leo’s costume was the first thing they saw in the tailor’s room. Newly finished and pressed, it hung on a hanger ready to take away. Leo thanked the tailor for doing so fine a piece of work, and the tailor replied how pleased he was that Leo was pleased; then they shook hands quickly because Leo could hardly wait to get to his room and put it on.

The jester helped him into it, and showed him how to make the cap look most rakish and how to set all the

bells ringing with a slight toss of the head. Leo stood before the mirror thinking how well he looked in black, silver and purple. After five minutes of this, the jester said it was practically lunch-time, and they'd better see about washing their hands.

Punctually at midday they entered the upper dining-room, which was for those who were too important to be called plain servants but not important enough to dine in the presence of the royal family. There were several long tables with benches alongside, which reminded Leo a little of the Tritten orphanage, only the furniture was cleaner and the guests more gloomy and elderly. Leo sat down between Jack and the Assistant Astrologer Royal, and had time to be introduced only to his nearest neighbours before the soup came in and made hearing impossible.

Everybody ate rapidly, as they always seem to when dozens sit at the same table. If he paused to think or observe, Leo found that the vegetables or the bread passed by without stopping, so he kept his head down and gobbled in competition with the others. Not until the suet pudding had been cleared and the coffee set down did he have time to look around.

By then people were ready to talk, and the air was much more human and friendly. Some of them changed places for a word with their friends, others shouted and waved across the table to save the trouble of moving. Nobody took much notice of Leo, although several glanced at him in his conspicuous costume.

'You'll feel strange for a meal or two, naturally,' whispered Jack. 'But don't think they're being unfriendly. You know how it always is with strangers. Look at that one over there, for instance: the Astrologer Royal, who tells fortunes. You'd think him the grumpiest man

on earth, with his spectacles and his yellow beard. But give him your open hand and he'd be all over it, gabbling at nineteen to the dozen. And the thin one beside him—that's the prince's history tutor. Only give him a kind look, and talk, talk, talk: he'd chatter away to you for longer than you'd care to listen.'

And now several were leaving the table to begin their afternoon's work. Jack seized one or two by the arm for a passing introduction, but Leo scarcely caught their names. It would be some time before he would be able to place them; meanwhile, he decided, he must smile at everybody in case he had been presented to them.

The rest of the day Leo had pretty well to himself, for Jack spent the afternoon washing his stockings—a thing he would never trust to the palace laundry, he declared—and the evening in privately entertaining the king, who had gone to bed early with something to eat on a tray. So Leo borrowed a song-book from Jack called *XXX Merry Lays for Minstrels*, and went through them all with his guitar.

After supper he wrote to his friend in Tritten. 'I am having a wonderful time,' he began; then he scratched out 'wonderful' and put 'very strange'. 'I haven't done any work yet, so I don't know whether I'm good or bad, or whether the king likes me. I met the king this morning and wasn't a bit frightened of him. I saw the princesses too, who are v. jolly, but so far I've not seen Her Majesty the Q. or Prince Florizel. I'm a bit lonely and sorry I've not had a chance to prove myself, but I expect I will soon. Jack is awfully kind, and I'm sure all the others are awfully nice. I wish you were with me. Your friend, Leo.'

Soon after that he went to bed, where he suddenly felt very unimportant and useless indeed, until he fell asleep

and dreamed he was King Purple's cousin, which set him up very nicely.

CHAPTER VI

AT BREAKFAST LEO felt much more his old self. 'If you feel ready,' said Jack, 'you might come in to lunch today. There'll be nothing for you to do but sit still and watch me. I'll be hovering round the king, working like anything. Making him laugh, while his drink he would quaff. I did once, by the way, and he nearly choked over a goblet of Rhenish wine. I'll find you somewhere to sit, where you can see all that goes on. One o'clock, just after you've had your own lunch.'

The main dining-room was as splendid in its own way as the king's bedroom, and much much bigger. Jack took Leo for a peep inside while the footmen still tripped about laying the cloths. The royal high table stood near the far wall, slightly raised above the table where the lesser guests sat and which ran at right angles to it like the standing-up part of the letter T. Round the other walls there were spare tables which could be pulled up when more guests were expected, and side tables for food and dishes. From the painted ceiling there hung five chandeliers and a bunch of loudspeaker horns springing from the mouths of gilt cherubs and demons. It was not the sort of room where you could have a quick breakfast in a dressing-gown.

'What a lot they must eat,' Leo remarked. 'Where do you sit?'

'I hover behind the king at the high table,' Jack said.
'At my age a long banquet is very tiring on the feet.'

A little before one the dining-room began to fill with ladies and gentlemen in rather severe clothes. They stood behind their chairs until the king and queen should arrive, while the footmen still darted about adding last-minute cruets and knives. Like an old hand the jester pushed his way to the king's table, nodding at one or another, utterly at his ease. Leo followed close at his heels, with a burning feeling at the back of his head as if caused by a battery of staring eyes. On the platform Jack motioned to a footman to set a stool for Leo close behind the king.

The bustling and talking grew louder while more and more people came in, some to the high table, some to the low. Suddenly they were hushed as a side door opened with a slight scrape and a squeak, and in trooped the royal family. King Purple and Queen Madge came first, with the king's aged mother, the Dowager Queen Gertrude, a close second, and the two princesses and Prince Florizel last. They moved straight to their own chairs, as calmly as cows to their separate stalls in the milking-shed; then the king mumbled a Latin grace meaning 'Thanks for our humble repast', and they all sat down.

There was a moment's silence while a dignified scholarly gentleman stood up at a sort of desk and began to read out very loud from an ancient story-book. Then the conversation began again, and the reader was heard only during short pauses.

'The King's Reader,' Jack explained in a side whisper to Leo, 'a traditional post. He's meant to entertain the king while he eats. But it's wasted energy really, because the king prefers reading to himself.'

And indeed there was a book propped in a silver stand by the king's plate. Now and then he would pause with his soup spoon suspended while he read a sentence or two.

'How can he possibly concentrate on a book with all this noise?' Leo whispered.

'I don't think he notices,' Jack answered. 'And he likes to be kept amused.'

Just at that moment a flood of band music issued from the cherubs' and demons' loudspeakers. It blared high above the chatter of the diners, the even tones of the King's Reader, and the clatter and hiss of platters and footmen.

'The king's favourite record, this,' whispered Jack—only it was really a shout which sounded like a whisper. 'And here', he went on, 'is where I help amuse the king.'

By leaning sideways on his stool Leo could see the jester singing something into the king's ear. The king seemed not to be attending much, until presently Jack raised his bladder and stick and fetched the king a smart blow on the ear. The king stopped short in the middle of a yawn, and returned to his book, while a footman whisked aside his empty plate and slid forward another.

Leo wished he could hear what Jack said to the king, but he might as well have listened to a sparrow in a parrot-house. So he swivelled his stool an inch farther back for a look at the queen and the dowager.

Not a queen who would stand much nonsense, he reflected. Queen Madge was thin, straight and tall, more than two Patrian cubits higher than the king, with a firm beaky face and untidy hair. No, Leo thought, one would have to be careful with her. He glanced at the dowager queen. What could one think of the dowager queen? Well, it was hard to tell. At her very considerable age

there was not so much left of her, save a wrinkly face and wispy white hair. Her expression told nothing of what she was thinking, if indeed she was thinking at all. And since nobody spoke to her she said nothing to them, and her lips moved only when she nibbled.

The jolly princesses sat together, giggling and gobbling and sometimes smacking each other's wrists. Next to Princess Albina sat Prince Florizel, their brother. He looks a cheerful enough lad, Leo thought, quite big for fifteen or sixteen or whatever his age is. *I wouldn't say he wasn't strong*, he thought further, remembering his supposed delicateness: *I'm sure he can live long enough to be king. . . .*

Luncheon seemed to be a very big meal, for the footmen jumped ceaselessly up and down with new dishes. Everyone ate very quickly; perhaps the constant noise unnerved and excited them. By the time the platters and goblets had been recharged and refilled a dozen times, Leo's mouth began to water. It couldn't have been only an hour since he ate his own lunch, he thought.

When the meal ended, it ended with a bang. One moment the lunchers were hastening over their last morsels, taking their cue from the king. Then all at once the king shut his book and pushed away his coffee-cup, Jack paused in the act of bombasting the king with his bladder, the Reader ceased reading, the loudspeakers stopped in the middle of a tune, and all talking ended. Everyone stood up reverently, keeping silence while the king mumbled a Latin grace meaning 'Thanks for this humble repast and for all humble repasts to come'—then the royal family trooped out.

A moment later Leo and Jack were elbowing their way towards the main doors, where each member of the royal household was struggling to get out first.

'They seem very eager to get to work,' Leo remarked.

'Work?' said the jester. 'There won't be a stroke done these next two hours. They'll be lying on their beds getting over the meal. I shall do the same for that matter, unless I decide to learn some new patter. See you at tea in the U.D.R.—upper dining room.'

It was a week later, and Leo was feeling less satisfied than most of the palace staff with having so little to do. Looking back, he seemed to have done nothing to earn his wages. He had attended the jester and watched him at work, several times during meals and once in private with the king. He already felt used to the bustle and noise of mealtimes in the royal dining-room; the near presence of the king filled him with much less awe; the princesses smiled on him like old friends; Prince Florizel once or twice nodded his way, although they hadn't yet spoken to each other; and he had made many friends among the inhabitants of the palace.

On the whole Leo was happy, although he wondered each hour of the day how soon Jack would let him try his talents on the king. He improved every spare minute in rehearsing new songs and in learning new jokes. In fact, he had crammed his mind with so many that he feared to forget them unless something happened soon.

And then he was summoned without notice. One afternoon Jack said, 'Well, Leo, your chance is now. The king's in a dull mood with nothing to do. He's betaken himself to bed and wants to be amused. It's your turn to amuse him; he's waiting now. Go down and cheer him up—and remember all I told you.'

Leo raced upstairs to fetch his guitar and hastily brush up some riddles he thought would appeal to the king. His heart beat madly, for now that his moment had come

he was full of doubts. Then he hurried below, slowing down when he reached the purple corridor. Outside the king's bedroom he wondered whether to knock or merely to burst in. I'll do as Jack does, he decided. He took a deep breath, threw out his chest, and boldly marched in.

There was nobody at home. The bed-clothes were ruffled, and Leo put his hand on the pillow and found it still warm. He coughed loudly.

'Mr. King,' he called, 'Mr. King, King, King?' That was what he would call King Purple until he thought of a proper nickname. 'Nuncle' suited him well, but that was Jack's name for him, and Leo preferred something new.

'Mr. King, where are you?' he asked in a sing-song voice. Then he sat on the edge of the bed and picked up a book which the king had been reading. It was called *A Kingdom Decaying*, by a former ambassador to the court of King Purple. Many passages had been marked in pencil, and there were notes in the margins in the king's hand such as 'Lies!' 'Untruth!' 'A Black Lie!' 'Couldn't be true!' 'False!' 'Who told him that?'—and so forth. Evidently the king was not enjoying the book.

There was also a leather-bound volume called *The Megrim Murder Mystery*, which began with a Patrian boatman finding the body of a Prug frontier guard floating down the River Megrim. This was more to Leo's taste, and he stretched himself out on the king's bed for a better read. After ten pages he became so absorbed that he failed to hear the king's footsteps in the corridor.

Suddenly he looked up and found King Purple in his dressing-gown staring at him.

'Well, I must say——' the king began.

Leo jumped up guiltily, preparing to fall on his knee. Then he remembered his position and privileges, and answered him boldly.

'Say what, Mr. King?' he asked. It was the only reply that he could think of for the moment.

The king looked perplexed for a moment, even angry. His lips moved without any words coming out, which gave Leo a chance to maintain his position.

'Don't say it, Mr. King,' he said firmly. 'Just pop back into bed, and keep very still, and let Uncle Leo sing for you. No, no; not a syllable out of you. Do as I command.'

He held back the counterpane and ushered his speechless sovereign into the warm depths. The king was still trying to blurt out something. I must work fast, thought Leo, and give him no opening. Already he had his guitar in position, and while he was deciding what to sing first he played *plonk plink-plink*, *plonk plink-plink*, over and over again. Such an accompaniment suited any number of songs, and presently Leo began:

*In the cold April rain, let us stroll down the lane
Where the angry cock-throstle is calling in vain.
Where the mistletoe hangs from the old ivy bough,
You will quarrel with I, I will quarrel with thou.*

Leo glanced at the king whose brows were knitted in perplexity. Clearly it was a song he had not heard. Never mind, thought Leo, it still pleases me.

*And at night, when the moon turns a succulent brown
And there's little to do but set fire to the town,
We will range o'er the moors with a snake in each hand,
And patch up the holes in our stockings with sand.*

Plink *plonk-plonk*—
'What are you singing about?' asked the king pettishly.
'I never heard such nonsense.'

'There's a good deal more yet,' Leo answered.

'Then it is not my wish to hear it.'

'All right,' Leo said, 'then answer me this. If it takes two Chinamen and an old-fashioned innkeeper three hours to blow a soap bubble the size of a tall ladder, starting immediately after lunch and using a clay pipe and a big handful of soft soap, what time is it?'

King Purple screwed up his face in thought.

'I won't tell you,' he said at length. 'I do know, but I'm not going to tell you.'

'Clever Mr. King!' Leo answered. 'But how do I know you know?'

King Purple sat up indignantly. 'Are you daring to say a king does not speak the truth?' he demanded.

'I'm sure you're not,' Leo said, marvelling at his own daring. 'Otherwise you'd have told me the answer at once and got very excited and proud about it. No—don't argue, and don't try to look fierce, because you can't do anything to me while I've got this costume on.'

'I can do anything I like,' spluttered King Purple. 'In case you haven't noticed it, I am the king here, and the sooner you learn a little respect——'

'Stop arguing!' Leo interrupted.

'I'm not arguing, I'm making a proclamation.'

'Then stop proclaiming, and stop quarrelling. All this fuss about a silly riddle. Now lie down again and be still while I sing you another song.'

King Purple was still quivering and looked on the verge of being really angry. But Leo knew the importance of holding his ground, and he smiled to himself as he strummed his guitar and sang:

*I know a village in Patria
Inhabited largely by owls.*

*'Tis there I spend the lonely nights
Whipping the neighbours' fowls.
Whether the trees be bare of leaves
Or bursting into buds,
The valleys echo far and wide
With cruel and rhythmic thuds.*

It couldn't be said to mean much, but it had a pretty tune, and the king nodded his head from side to side, and now and then hummed a snatch. As Leo dropped his voice on the third verse he noticed that King Purple had calmed down and was looking drowsy. Poor king, he's tired, Leo thought, and indeed the king did look weary and rather pathetically old. If he wants to sleep I won't disturb him, Leo went on thinking. Very softly he sang a lullaby he had learnt as a child, repeating and repeating it until the king began to breathe slumbrously.

Leo got up softly and tiptoed towards the door. There he paused and looked back. 'You couldn't have known the answer to the riddle,' he said 'because there isn't one.'

He knew the king was too far gone to hear him, but he didn't mind.

CHAPTER VII

LEO SAW JACK the next morning after the jester had been with the king. 'He likes you all right,' Jack remarked, 'though he didn't say so in so many words. In fact, he complained about you several times. "Young upstart," he said, "no respect. Impudent," and so on. I let

him say his say, and said yes, yes, yes, with my tongue in my cheek. Later on he said grudgingly: "Nice voice. Knows some pretty songs." "Very pretty," I said. "May improve," says Nuncle. "Oh, I don't know," says I. And later on still: "Think he's happy here?" "Happy?" says I, "oh, happy enough, I dare say." Nuncle doesn't say any more until the end, when he casually says he wants to see you at the same time today.'

"That means I'm all right then, does it?" said Leo eagerly.

Jack nodded, 'If you keep your head you won't need to worry much. First thing you know you'll be taking over from me and I shall be ready to retire. Poor old Jack has run his course; drive him out to pasture like a worn-out horse.'

Leo looked remorseful. 'Oh,' he exclaimed, 'I hate to feel that I may be pushing you out: that's the last thing in the world I want.'

'Don't give it a thought,' Jack answered. 'I believe I really look forward to leaving the court. I've worked here for a long time: such a long time. And now—well, I'm ready.'

'What'll you do then?' Leo asked.

'Live in the country and grow things. Throw away these coloured rags and wear what I like. Get rid of this artificial smile and this automatic laugh, and develop the habit of smiling and laughing at things that amuse me, because I can't help myself.'

'Where will you live, then?'

'On the king's country estate at Corona. There is a cottage on the edge of the wood near the hunting-lodge which he has promised me. It has a pond where the frogs sing all night in due season, and a lime tree under which you can sit while the world passes on without troubling

you. And old Granny Martella will be there to look after me. All this is mine when I want it.'

'It sounds lovely,' said Leo. 'May I come and visit you?'

'Naturally; I shall insist on it. Come as often as you please, and you shall tell me the latest news from the court. We shall have many a laugh together, the old jester and the young.'

'We'll laugh like anything,' Leo said.

So Leo entertained the king again that afternoon and the next, and soon it became a habit. As yet he was not asked to take Jack's place at mealtimes, but he was in no hurry. He preferred still to amuse the king privately, for in that way they grew used to each other and learned each other's tastes.

Meanwhile he continued to make friends among the palace staff. Day by day the stiffness seemed to go out of them, and they became not court officials but human beings dressed up as court officials. He learnt of their private lives and their private worries; sympathized with them about this matter, rejoiced with them about that, and congratulated them on the other. Often of an evening they would ask him to bring his guitar, and when the table was cleared they would sing until all hours the songs of which Patrians are most fond.

Soon he gained the reputation of being a friendly, cheerful companion. They liked his youth and his freshness, which had none of Jack's bitterness. (Truth, though sad truth, to tell: with the passing of time they were finding old Jack overmuch of a bore. His favourite jokes he had told so very often that you could almost see rust on them.) They liked his smile and his self-assurance, which rapidly grew once he felt among friends. They liked him, in fact, for what Leo was and

could not help being: a decent, unspoilt and carefree young man.

The First of May was a great day in Patria for everybody, May Day being a national holiday when they all dressed up and celebrated. In every village and town they dusted down their maypoles and set them up in prominent places all garlanded with flowers and ribbons. Fairs and circuses did a roaring trade, and all the day was given up to eating, drinking, dancing and other amusements.

May Day had a double importance at court, it being the birthday of Princess Albina. Falling as it did in the season of fine weather, it was usual to celebrate the occasion with a country outing. All the royal family took part, as well as quantities of court officials, and to top the festivities Princess Albina was crowned Queen of the May. So it had gone on for year after year since the princess was tiny—and long might the innocent fun continue!

On the last Friday in April Leo received a printed card inviting him to attend the outing as the guest of Princess Albina. ('Commanded' was the actual word, but that was the usual way of phrasing royal invitations, and wasn't meant to be taken fiercely.) Leo felt unusually honoured, until he found that dozens of others had received the same. Still, he reflected, it was kind of the princess; and he wondered whether he was expected to buy her a present. Jack said it wasn't necessary, the custom being for the guests to contribute a few kronys each, with which they bought a magnificent box of chocolates from all of them.

The outing took place at Corona, which was the king's private property and didn't get much used except on such occasions. In the early morning a fleet of cars assembled

in the palace courtyard where they lined up with much noise in order of importance. The king's car, of course, was in front, then the queen's, then the dowager queen's, then the highest officials', the middle or medium high, the lowest, and so down to the pageboys', the butlers' and footmen's, and the catering lorry which carried the food.

The procession was due to begin at ten o'clock. At half-past nine the first of the guests drifted towards the cars, taking the places they had always taken. At a quarter to ten Jack led Leo towards a black saloon car which was parked rather below the halfway mark. Both were dressed in their brightest motley, and Leo had tied red and white ribbons to his guitar. Most of the guests had discarded their sombre everyday clothes and had put on less formal things: flannels of grey and white, blazers, cotton dresses, straw hats and the like. 'It'll be fun,' said Jack; 'the king's in a festive mood.'

Sure enough the king came out smiling, with the queen on one arm and Princess Albina on the other, while Prince Florizel walked beside his other sister. The king wore his white flannel trousers, a white waistcoat and an old tweedy jacket with black and white squares; while on his head was a sun-helmet. The queen had on a long dress which swished round her ankles, and the widest of straw hats which flapped like an eagle's wings with every step she took. Prince Florizel sported some brand-new plus fours; and the princesses were dressed alike in pure white frocks, with wreaths of orange blossoms in their hair.

At the sight of the royal family dressed like any of their subjects on this day, the onlookers gathered outside the railings clapped and shouted 'Vivat Rex!' The royal family bowed before promenading with dignity towards the first of the waiting cars. As soon as the doors slammed



behind them there was a chorus of self-starters and all the engines whirred into life. The procession was ready to move.

But the king's car kept them waiting and waiting until chauffeurs and passengers impatiently craned their heads to discover the reason. Presently a footman came down the line, peering into every car. He stopped when he saw Leo. 'Pardon me, sir,' said he: 'Her Highness elects you as consort.'

'What on earth does he mean?' Leo whispered to Jack.

'It means that Princess Albina wants you to sit with her,' the jester explained. 'It's the custom: the princess's birthday privilege. She can choose whom she likes, and she's chosen you. Fortunate fellow—get on with you!'

'But I'd rather sit here,' Leo protested.

'You've no choice, lad. On your way!'

Leo followed the footman to the head of the line. He saw that the king and queen were in the queen's car, while the princesses sat in splendour in the king's on either side of Prince Florizel. On Leo's arrival the prince was squeezed out into a spare tip-up seat, when Princess Amnesia patted the seat as she announced: 'The Queen of the May bids you thrice welcome!'—and giggled as if at some witty saying.

'But I don't want to deprive Prince Florizel of his seat,' Leo said, as he stepped in with some awkwardness.

'It's quite all right,' Prince Florizel said with a friendly grin. 'My sisters are always depriving me of something or other. How are you, Leo? We don't know each other properly yet, but I hope we shall. I'm not a bit fierce, although some people think I'm spoilt. Still, I hope you'll like me.'

The footman closed the door, and the party set off. A great cheer went up at the sight of the royal car, while

Leo tried to snuggle out of sight so as not to appear to think himself important. Everywhere in Pelt people paused and waved in recognition. For the royal car was well known in Patria—and had been for over thirty years. There was no other car like it: it was the only Rolls-Rex in the world. Years ago, when King Purple decided to move with the times, he had ordered the car to be specially built; and specially built it had been, all by hand. The makers in England had taken a year; they called it the Rolls-Rex and promised King Purple they'd never make another for anyone else. Pelt was proud of the king's car then; and although every year it looked more and more old-fashioned beside the streamlined upstarts which rushed past it on the road, Pelt was proud of it still. What matter if it looked all angled and boxy?—it never went wrong, and as King Purple said, a new car costs money.

In the drive through the city the princesses were too busy giggling and wagging their hands at the people to pay much attention to Leo, but once in the country they relaxed and became attentive.

'Just think,' said Albina, 'it's my birthday. Aren't I lucky?'

'Oh, stop boasting!' answered her sister. 'I had one in December, so there!'

'But you weren't a May Queen, anyway,' said Albina. 'You couldn't be, not in December.'

'All right, all right: I'm not jealous. I shall talk to Leo, won't I, Leo?'

'Well——' began Leo.

'So shall I,' put in Albina. 'After all, Leo's *my* consort.'

'I feel very honoured,' Leo said. 'But tell me, why are we allowed to ride in front of your parents—in front of the king and queen, that is?'

'Because it's my day today,' Albina explained, 'and so today I'm more important than Mummy or Daddy: the most important person in Patria, in fact.'

'Hoity-toity!' said Amnesia. 'She says that every year, but you don't have to believe her. She's just a silly, affected thing.'

'Silly yourself!' snapped her sister, with such force that Leo feared a serious quarrel. Then their brother turned round and smiled at Leo.

'Don't think they're about to fight,' he said. 'They bicker like this when they're most friendly and happy.'

They were well out of Pelt now and into the spring-freshened country. Through the back window Leo could see the king and queen riding comfortably in Her Majesty's car; and behind them the other cars wound in and out of a column of dust. It was good to get out of the palace and out of the city for a change. Leo wondered how Jack was enjoying himself, and the dowager queen who sat alone with expressionless face in her own car.

'My word, I feel good!' exclaimed Prince Florizel suddenly. 'Thank you, Albina, for having your birthday at such a beautiful time.'

'We both feel good too,' said Albina, clapping her hands.

'And you, Leo?' Amnesia asked. 'But there's no need to inquire: we all know from your looks that you always feel good. My sister and I often say how jolly you seem—don't we, Albina?'

'Very often. That's why I chose you for my escort today instead of some stuffy duke or something. I said to my sister: "After all, it's my choice today, so I'll ask that nice Leo. It'll be a special treat for him, and he isn't likely to have many such opportunities."'

The elder princess nodded. 'So today is your big day, Leo,' she said smiling and fluttering. You know,' she went on, 'my sister and I have often said what a pity it is that you're only an orphan and not a lord. Otherwise we could see lots of each other, and have jolly times together without people talking.'

'Yes, it is a pity,' Leo agreed—rather ashamedly, as though excusing his humble origin.

'Still,' said Albina thoughtfully, after a pause, 'there have been tales where even beggar men married kings' daughters, and lived happily ever after.'

'I suppose there have,' Leo said, 'but those were in ancient days.'

The conversation seemed to be growing somewhat too friendly, opening up possibilities of which Leo wouldn't dare to dream. He had never given marriage a thought, and much as he liked the two princesses he was sure he wouldn't care to marry either—not if he were a prince and they were the only princesses in the world.

He heard the princesses each give a sigh; then they settled back to enjoy the drive. They were now in the depths of the country, rolling on between pastures and woods and through thinly peopled villages. Presently the wooden signposts began to mention Corona among a lot of other places, and as the distance grew less the name worked its way up to the top. At length it had a board to itself: 'Corona 5 kilometres,' it said; and the procession swung obediently down the lane it was pointing to.

'This is where the estate begins,' Albina said, indicating a seemingly endless wall which must once have been the builders' pride but now was mostly too old to stand up. Through the gaps could be seen clumps of trees, with browsing deer dotted beneath and sometimes a family of cattle.

‘The park’s full of deer,’ Amnesia remarked. ‘Sometimes we have to eat venison for days on end.’

‘And look,’ said Albina, ‘that’s the lake where we used to go boating as children. Then Florizel fell in one day, and we were forbidden to go near it.’

‘And the wood behind stretches for ever and ever so far,’ put in Amnesia. ‘It’s full of wild boar, and it used to be Daddy’s favourite hunting-ground, until one day Florizel was badly frightened when he met a tame pig inside. After that Daddy lost heart when he thought what might have happened to our precious and valuable prince, so he declared it out of bounds.’

‘I say, you two,’ protested Florizel, turning round with a blush on his face, ‘you don’t have to make me sound such a mother’s boy.’

Amnesia giggled. ‘Well, it’s true isn’t it, about the lake and the pig and—oh, here’s the entrance, Leo.’

The Rolls-Rex pulled up before a wide pair of iron gates—or rather, one and a half gates, for the left-hand one had been split by a falling tree some years ago and never repaired. Already the lodge-keeper, a plump old body, had heard the procession approaching and was tugging and straining to pull the gates open.

‘Alley-oop!’ she cried triumphantly as they yielded. The next moment the princesses were banging at the car windows and calling, ‘Hullo, Granny Liverwurst; hullo. Granny Liverwurst!’

‘Hullo, and God bless ye, me dears!’ she called back, as the Rolls-Rex brushed her magnificently aside.

‘That’s old Granny Liverwurst,’ explained Princess Amnesia. ‘She’s been here for simply hundreds of years and adores us.’

‘We’ve always called her Granny Liverwurst,’ added

Princess Albina. 'Isn't it a funny name? Though her real name is Mrs. Liverwurst.'

She giggled in delight, and her sister joined in. The sight of their country home was raising their spirits to a new pitch of excitement. Now they were bouncing up and down on the seat as the car dipped in and out of the pot-holed drive.

At last the drive spread out like a fan in front of the house, and the Rolls-Rex completed its journey in a swirl of dust. One by one the following cars took up their parking positions, and the occupants stepped out and stretched themselves. Leo waited for the princesses to alight before asking permission to leave them. He wanted to find Jack, who would best show him what to do and where to go.

He discovered the jester standing apart in contemplation of the mansion. 'It gets older and older,' he remarked to Leo, 'and decrepiter and decrepiter.'

The mansion indeed had a tired, neglected air. For most of the year its many rooms were locked and forgotten, and the only signs of life came from the house-keeper and her husband and a family of owls which had lived there for generations. But today, with the sun and the bustling crowd to enliven the scene, it put on a sort of smile.

'The revelry's round at the back,' Jack said as he took Leo's arm and joined the chattering party. Everybody wandered at leisure towards the great lawn on the other side of the mansion.

'Oh, how splendid!' remarked Leo.

He stopped short to gaze at the cheerful setting. In the middle of the lawn stood the maypole, with a crown at the summit from which ribbons fluttered. A short distance away a gilt throne awaited the Queen of the May,

and beyond were long tables with benches alongside. Elsewhere, in and out of the shade, there were camp-stools garlanded with flowers, gaily coloured mattresses for reclining, and booths set with flagons and glasses.

Already the butlers and footmen were hastening to unpack the food and prepare it for serving. The sight of the piled-up refreshments caused the hungrier guests to stop talking; they hung about anxiously while the others looked grandly away and pretended indifference. Meanwhile the king and queen drifted from one guest to the next with a cheerful, a gracious or a sociable remark for each, and the princesses sneaked away to beg a pastry from the major-domo in charge.

Suddenly there were sounds of 'Sh! Sh!'—everybody shushing everybody else as it was seen that the king wished to make an announcement. 'Sh, sh!' said the old Duke of Pellicule, 'sh, sh!' (He was rather deaf, and it had to be explained to him at last that he was holding things up by being the only one still making any noise.)

'I just wanted to say', announced King Purple, 'that today being May Day you can all sit where you like. There shall be no ceremony or formalities.'

So saying he sat at the head of the table and immediately there was a rush for the highest places. Those who for ages had wanted preferment scrambled for the seats next to him, where they could make themselves noticed by the king. Even the queen was forgotten, so that she was one of the last to be seated. The very last was the dowager queen.

Jack and Leo sat in a humble position as far from King Purple as could be. Their neighbours were the Astrologer Royal and the Controller of the Royal Transport. Beyond each was a lady-in-waiting and then a princess.

The Royal Caterer certainly knew what an outdoor

lunch should consist of. It started with little nothings made from salted fish, intended to whet the appetite; then there were skylarks stuffed with preserved chestnuts and sage, a salad, cold omelets, cold salmon and lobster. After that the meal verged on the substantial side. Pigs' feet in jelly, with roast capons hot on their heels, goose and turkey and venison pie, cold pork and cold bacon: course by course they were set before the expanding guests. Then the sweets appeared—pastries, jellies, fruit salads, blancmanges of all colours and shapes. And all the time corks popped from their bottles with the noise of fire crackers, as the footmen moved about filling flagons and glasses. Afterwards there was coffee and tea, with dainty sugared fruits for the ladies and cigars for the gentlemen.

Just before the meal ended a band of musicians appeared from the kitchen garden and disposed themselves under the lime trees. In no time at all they were blowing and scraping away at traditional dances and jigs. It was a gipsy band which spent most of its time in the village of Corona, sallying forth at harvest to enliven the feasts round about. Although it adhered to the traditional airs of Patria, the band included a number of modern, as well as traditional, instruments. Thus in addition to the lute and the shepherd's pipes, there was a saxophone and an electric organ. This last was the pride of the band: it ran off a battery charged by a dynamo, which in turn was driven by a donkey wheel. The dynamo stood apart at the end of a cable and through the trees one could see the donkey pulling a pole endlessly in circles. Then there were two violins and a viol, a tallboy, a sackbut, a cornet, a psaltery and a guitar.

'Let's go and dance!' Jack said suddenly, taking Leo by the arm and offering a hand to the Astrologer Royal.

The Astrologer Royal was too busy to hear. He had swilled the dregs of his teacup round the edges and was reading his fortune in the leaves.

'Coming?' Leo asked the Controller of the Royal Transport.

The Controller nodded and struggled to his feet. The younger members of the party had already taken their places round the maypole, and there wasn't a spare ribbon to be had. But others were forming foursomes and eightsomes, so that Leo and Jack and the Controller soon found a place. The band changed from a reel to a soberer waltz, and the dancers began to warm up.

After the waltz came a coranto, then a country dance, a minuet and a jig. Soon the dancers were dabbing at their brows and wiping their hands on their handkerchiefs. 'More, more,' shouted Princess Albina, clapping her hands. The swarthy gipsy conductor bowed and muttered something to the band, which burst out into such a passionate gipsy tune that half the company retired exhausted.

In time there were general signs of wear and tear. One by one the guests settled themselves into chairs or upon mattresses. The king, who had not danced at all, looked more fatigued than anybody, his face flushed with heat under his sun-helmet. The queen, however, had partnered Baron Mildew in one of the less boisterous waltzes. Now she sat on a camp-stool which was completely hidden by her dress, so that she resembled a statue waiting to be unveiled. Close to her sat the dowager queen, unmoved by the revelry and unaffected by the heat.

The princesses had drawn together and were whispering and pointing towards Leo. Suddenly Princess Albina called out, 'Sing us a song,' and her sister called, 'Yes, do!'

'No, no,' Leo protested, although he felt encouraged

by the applause which greeted the suggestion. It would be awkward and presumptuous in front of Jack, he felt; wishing they had at least asked Jack first. But Jack was applauding too. 'Go on, lad!' he said.

The company settled down to listening attitudes while Leo borrowed a guitar from the band and stepped into the circle. He wanted very much to please them, for this was the first time they had listened to the king's new jester. What sort of a song would they like? he wondered. A May song of some kind would be the most suitable—something simple and soothing and easy to listen to.

While the company kept respectfully hushed he began with 'The Fifth-Month Pastoral', a Patrian folk-song which most of them knew. It had a pretty lilt and he sang it easily, and at the end a handsome round of applause encouraged him to sing another. This time it would be more cheerful, and perhaps they would join in the chorus if he put enough zest into it.

*The spring is advancing; in valleys and hills
The cuckoos and nightingales open their bills.
—Cuckoo, jug-jug, cuckoo, jug-jug, cuckoo . . .*

Enough of the company had heard the song before to know what was expected of them, and they cuckooed and jug-jugged with a will.

*The turtle dove coos as he longs for his mate:
The woodpecker pecks as he waggles his pate.
—Tack-tack, coo, tack-tack, coo, tack-tack.
The ravens and eagles scream out on their flight:
The nightjar goes whirr as he jars in the night.
—Caw-caw, whirr, wheee, caw, wheee, whirr.*

The sixth verse ended in pandemonium, the company taking deep breaths as Leo sang the introductory lines:

*In forest and field, on the ground, on the wing,
The fowls and the beasties make noisome the spring.*

Then there was such a burst of cheep-cheeps, jug-jugs, grunt-grunts, ha-has, cuckoos, peck-pecks, yaffle-yaffles, neigh-neighs, honk-honks, pink-pinks, quack-quacks, and so on as caused even the dowager queen to show signs of animation.

'Bravo, Leo, bravo!' called the audience when their breath was at last spent. And: 'Another, another!' they demanded.

'But something a little quieter, I think,' suggested Queen Madge; 'something restful and soothing.'

Leo bowed to her as he wondered what to choose.

Then: 'Philomel,' called out the prince. 'Do you know "Philomel"? It's my favourite song.'

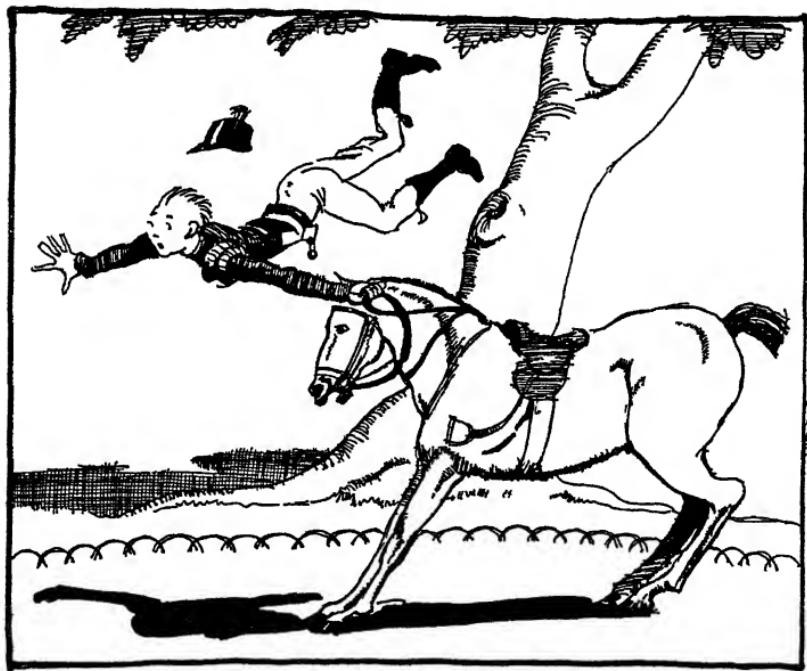
Leo nodded. It was a graceful old song, nearly as old as music. He softly brushed the strings of his guitar while the audience finished the odds and ends of coughing. Then he began singing tenderly:

*Philomel, Philomel:
Lo, here the gentle lark so cumberless
Now leaves its watery nest in th' wilderness,
And straight her wings she rinses.*

There was no longer a sound; the audience listened attentively like wolves round a camp fire. Leo continued with the second verse:

*Philomel, Philomel:
A late lark twitters in the quiet skies;
The lark ascending—*

Leo was unable to finish, for there was a violent and important distraction. The clatter of horse's hooves in a hurry made everyone sit up and look. Round the corner of the mansion a messenger burst into view, very excited and all but exhausted. At the sight of the gathering on the lawn he reined in his horse with such a jerk that he



flew over its head on the gravel. Then he espied the king, and scrambled across to him, tugging at a letter tucked in his belt.

'Your Majesty!' he gasped, falling on one knee and proffering the letter. Then, with a feeble I've-done-my-duty sort of smile, he collapsed for a short fainting spell.

Nobody thought of helping revive him. For eagerly,

with anxiety on all their faces, the guests watched the king struggle with the seal on the envelope. The queen had risen and was looking over his shoulder as he felt for his glasses and half-settled them on his nose. To the waiting guests he seemed to be reading terribly slowly. Evidently the letter contained bad news—serious news indeed, to judge from the expression of horror which blackened the king's features.

You could have heard a pin drop, even on the lawn, as the king put down the letter. Then he raised it to his eyes, and the guests burst into a groan as he began reading it all over again. Before he had finished conjectures buzzed round from mouth to mouth. ‘Somebody’s died, somebody important, sure as anything,’ muttered the Astrologer Royal; ‘I saw ominous signs and portents in the tea-leaves.’ ‘Gracious!’ his neighbour answered, forgetting that the prince was among them and practically at his elbow, ‘Prince Florizel. It couldn’t be the prince, could it?’ ‘Why couldn’t it?’ said the Astrologer: ‘He has a very, very tricky horoscope.’

All of a sudden Princess Albina could no longer bear the suspense. ‘What does it say, Daddy?’ she implored.

The king gave a start, then he deliberately tore the message into small pieces and stamped on them.

‘No, no,’ he moaned, ‘it is taking *too* much for granted!’ He had forgotten for the moment where he was. Now he looked around at the expectant faces and gave an angry snort.

‘My subjects,’ he announced in a stern, bitter voice: ‘I have unwelcome news. Our cousin King Decimal has declared his intention of paying us a state visit in July. Never a by-your-leave, never a please or a thank-you, never the thought that I might have chosen to take my holiday during that time. No; simply “His Majesty of

Prug is graciously pleased to inform his royal cousin"—and', he added in a burst of temper, 'I... just... don't... want... him!'

He sat down clenching and unclenching his fists. He was too upset to notice the wave of relief that spread over the faces of his hearers. For a few minutes he brooded while they waited upon him. Then he sighed a deep sigh and said hollowly, 'Continue the revels'.

So the revels continued, but the king's very noticeable lack of enjoyment took the heart out of them. The dances lacked spirit, the crowning of Princess Albina as Queen of the May was so hurried over that even she didn't enjoy it, and the picnic tea seemed to have no taste. Nobody was really sorry when the time came to pack up and return to Pelt.

CHAPTER VIII

LEO FOUND THE next few days extremely trying. The king was in a constant bad temper and refused to be shaken out of it. He stayed in bed brooding until a late hour, and thundered at anybody who crossed his path. When he didn't thunder, he snapped. Leo felt the lash of his tongue several times, and it so hurt him that he forgot he could answer him back. What made matters more difficult was Jack's cold, which kept him in bed so that Leo had to wait on the king both privately and at meal times.

He did himself some good during the luncheon period, for he soon found that amid all the noise it was impossible to make himself heard. So when he took up his place

behind the king he needed only to go through the motions of singing and playing. In fact, though, he found relief in singing rude things about King Purple in a loud voice, and including odd couplets about the queen.

But alone with the king it was different. Nothing pleased His Majesty, who did not hesitate to say so. 'Silly!' he would remark at the end of Leo's favourite jokes. 'Unmelodious!' he snapped at the end of each song. 'Wouldn't even try!' he said in answer to every riddle. It was all most discouraging.

'Well, what *do* you want to hear?' Leo asked suddenly, when he had had just about enough.

'Anything,' the king answered vaguely: 'Anything—so long as it isn't about King Decimal's visit.'

'I've never once mentioned it,' said Leo. 'Though, now you come to talk about it, what's there so terribly tragic about his visit?'

'It's expensive, for one thing,' the king answered, 'and I can ill afford to throw away good money on a bad thing. Secondly, he only wants to come so that he can spy on my son and me and work out his chances of outliving us both. Thirdly, he likes to show us up by a vulgar display of pomp and ceremony. Fourthly—well, fourthly he always makes me feel uncomfortable. I'm—well, dash it, if you must know—I'm *scared* of him!'

'Oh,' Leo said.

'Oh', repeated the king. 'Oh, oh, oh! Is that all you can say? You see, you just don't understand. You don't know what it's like to be a king, without a moment or a soul to call your own. You think it's a great and pleasurable thing. But it isn't. I'd rather be one of my meanest subjects begging for bread.'

'Nonsense!' exclaimed Leo, 'you don't know what

you're saying. Have you ever seen a beggar at close quarters, not merely from the back seat of the Rolls-Rex?

'Of course I have!—and don't you say "nonsense" to me. And why aren't you entertaining me? Go on, sing something.'

Leo sang 'The Blind Beggar's Marching Song', but it wasn't a success. 'Very stupid,' the king said, 'and in poor taste.'

'I'm sorry,' Leo said wearily, 'but nothing pleases you these days. I shall leave you.'

He left the room in an irritated mood, all but slamming the door. 'That king!' he muttered indignantly.

'I beg your pardon?' asked a footman who happened to be passing.

'Nothing,' said Leo, 'nothing.'

He dragged along the corridor, tired and dispirited. A week ago he was enjoying himself, enjoying the court life, enjoying his hours with the king. Now everything was bitter; it seemed no use trying to please. At the foot of the stairs he had a sudden longing for Tritten. I was free there, he thought, among my own chosen friends and my own sort of people. I've a good mind to go back, he thought, as he paused with his foot on the first stair. 'To go back to Tritten,' he said out aloud. 'And yet—I don't know; I'm just fed up for the time being. This will pass, once the king stops fussing.'

He sighed a deep sigh, which brought him halfway down the upper corridor. I'll go and see Jack, he decided, turning back. 'Bother the king!' he exclaimed. 'And bother King Decimal!'

'Hear, hear,' said a cheerful voice: and Prince Florizel was close behind him.

'Oh dear,' Leo said, 'you weren't supposed to hear.'

'That's *quite* all right. What's the matter, is Daddy being troublesome?'

'He is a bit, rather. Well, yes.'

'Never mind, Leo. He likes you really—honestly he does. We all do.'

'Do you; does he?' asked Leo, cheering up a good deal.

The prince nodded. 'Honest to goodness. And now come along and talk to me.'

He took Leo by the arm and guided him to his apartments. The rooms were comfortably laid out, full of books and a piano and beautiful curtains and rugs.

'Sit down here,' Florizel invited, producing a box of chocolates; 'and for goodness sake don't look so glum. Look, I'll play you something to cheer you up.'

The prince stuffed a couple of chocolates into his mouth and went to the piano. He raised the lid and plunged into a difficult sort of tune where you crammed as many notes as possible into the shortest time.

'Hooray!' burst out Leo, clapping his hands.

Prince Florizel stood up and bowed in professional style. 'And now, by special request,' said he—'my request, I shall play "Philomel". And you, also by my special request, shall sing it.'

Leo sang three verses of the old song, which was as many as he could remember; then Florizel sang a fourth, which he had forgotten. 'There ought to be more,' said the prince at the end. 'I should like it to go on for ever.'

'Let's make some up,' Leo suggested.

'Oh, I couldn't. I haven't that sort of brain. You try, while I play it.'

'*Philomel, Philomel*', Leo sang for a start. Then he stopped. 'No, I know,' he chuckled. 'Start again. Now:

'*Florizel, Florizel*: It fits exactly, don't you see?—er,

'Purple Rex's one and only son . . .'

'Stole a pig and fast away did run,' put in Prince Florizel while Leo was still thinking.

'Well, if he really did,' said Leo, *'Put not your trust in princes.'*

They must have made up a dozen verses, none of them any better than this, before they desisted. And by that time Leo felt first that it wasn't such a bad life after all, and second that it could be a lot worse, and third that he wouldn't change with anybody for anything. . . .

He jested his way almost single-handed through the next week, by which time old Jack really was ready to retire. They organized a farewell party for him, much on the lines of a birthday party. It was an exclusively palace affair, no guests being invited who didn't actually live on the spot. The many notables included the royal family as a whole, but there were many equally welcome unnotables, such as the head cook and the humble Washer of the King's Bottles. Presents absolutely poured in, from all sides as well as top and bottom. The king gave him a very rare and special decoration, which included a silver medal with a multi-coloured ribbon to hang it round his neck; Queen Madge gave him a toast-rack big enough to hold five thick slices (she was furious when somebody else gave him one big enough to hold six); the princesses gave him a useful silver tray inscribed 'To Dear Jack whom Everyone Laughs at, from Amnesia P. and Albina P.' There were dozens and scores more, enough to fill a column of the next day's Court Circular, which listed them all in print.

Behind all the jollity and speech-making, the back-slapping and the candle-blowing, there was a slight touch of sadness. For poor old Jack would be with them no more; poor old Jack who'd been so much a part of the

palace for so long that the palace and he might have started together. He was out of date, certainly, in his idea of humour—if you wanted a good laugh you'd listen to the radio rather than old Jack—but he . . . well, he . . . I mean, he . . . oh, well, I mean: he *was* old Jack. . . .

King Purple was in his finest fettle. ‘Eat up, friends; eat as much as you like!’ Then he told them a funny story—too long to be repeated here—which began: ‘There was a fellow jumped into a hansom cab,’ and never got finished because a crumb of cake lodged in his throat and made him choke. By the time normal breathing returned he had lost the thread of the story.

Presently they burst into community singing, and at the end of ‘For he’s a jolly good Jester’ King Purple commanded silence.

‘Speech, speech!’ cried the guests.

‘That’s just why I told you to be quiet,’ said the king; and everybody laughed, although the king hadn’t meant it to be funny.

Then he launched into a speech all about how fine he was (applause), how faithful he was (applause) and how funny he was (laughter). There were few jesters left in the world today (cries of ‘Why not?’—‘I don’t know’, said the king) which was a pity for the world’s sake. And now, alas! (groans) with the retirement of old Jack (mingled applause at the name of Jack, and groans at his retirement) the world would be one more jester the poorer. However, the court would take courage in the fact that, although Jacks might come and go, there was still a Leo.

There was thunderous clapping at the name of Leo.

‘Speech, Leo, speech!’ called the guests.

‘Quiet!’ exclaimed King Purple, quite sharply. ‘This is Jack’s day.’

The king sat down and Jack stood up.

'King Purple, Queen Madge, Other Royalty and Friends,' he began: 'Last appearancesadden, for then something ends.' This started him on a long farewell speech, all in rhyme of a sort, and all rather humdrum and sing-song. It must have taken him ages to prepare, for 'Purple Rex' is not a thing you can find a rhyme for in a hurry, even if you *do* finally make shift with 'circumflex'. He had carefully learnt it by heart, although from time to time Jack paused in his recital to refer to the paper on which it was written.

Jack recalled memories of the many years he had spent at court, of people who had come and gone during that time, of births and marriages and deaths—in short, of all the different sort of things that happen in a jester's life-time.

And tomorrow, he remarked, he would be saying Good-bye to All That and retiring to his cottage in Corona, where a securè old age was waiting for him. 'So, thanks to King Purple,' he concluded, 'my future is certain. Then Off with the Motley, and Down with the Curtain!'

This dramatic finish brought forth bountiful applause, after which the guests stayed only long enough to finish the cakes and to drink a last toast.

And tomorrow old Jack, after saying good-bye to Leo last of all, was driven to his country retreat. So from the next chapter onwards Leo will be really and truly, wholly and solely, King Purple's jester.

CHAPTER IX

THE KING WAS in his counting-house, doing some very complicated arithmetic. He sat at a large table with the Controller of the Household on his left side and the Keeper of the King's Pocket Money on his right. Before him were spread books and papers of many sorts: notebooks and bankbooks, ledgers with blue and red columns crammed with figures, ready reckoners, sheets of palace



notepaper. There was also a black tin money-box with a slot big enough to take a silver dilnar, and a slide rule which told in an instant what this times that came to.

The king had his glasses on, and he was scribbling away, then rubbing out, then scratching and scribbling something different. Whatever he was working on, you could tell the solution was near from the quick way he breathed through his nostrils.

'And seven, and ten—' he murmured: 'No, that should be thirteen: I put the decimal point in the wrong place. Only thirteen? No, I left out a half-krongy some-

where . . . And two, and two more, comes to—No, I just can't afford it!'

He threw down his pen and leaned back defiantly.

'I cannot and will not,' he said. 'How much did King Decimal's last visit cost, do you remember?'

The Controller tapped his fingers on the table and looked blank.

'No, sir, not exactly,' he said, 'but it was a very big expense.'

'Very, *very* big,' corrected the king. 'And it's not as though you could have called it Value for Money. I hated every minute of his visit, and was never more glad to see the back of anybody than when he left.'

The Controller sat still and looked unhappy.

'And yet, sir,' he pointed out, 'there is nothing to be done at this stage. Let's see, where are we?—end of June, and King Decimal comes on the tenth of July. You cannot postpone His Majesty's visit now. Not one of your advisers but would say the same. Why, sir, throughout Pelt the flags are being hoisted already.'

Which was, in fact, the case. In every street officials and private citizens were beginning to hang out bunting and flags against the royal visit that nobody cared about. King Decimal was not loved by the Patrians, for they feared him and his power and dreaded that one day he might rule over them. Nevertheless a royal visit was a royal visit, and there were certain politenesses and customs to be observed, among them the hanging out of flags. Besides, it was nice to go gay once in a while.

With an ungracious sigh King Purple closed his account-books and accepted the inevitable. Very well, let him come; and let's still hope he may catch a cold or something to put him off.

A week later, feverish preparations went on in the

palace. Carpenters skipped from room to room doing running repairs to the furniture; painters slapped paint on the worst-peeling patches; bedmakers beat and pummelled the mattresses and cushions in the suite set apart for the king and queen of Prug and their retinue; char-women with long-handled brooms sought out the dust in the places they usually ignored. The higher officials made plans for the king's entertainment—dinners, balls, hunting parties, receptions. And all the time they grumbled and made sour faces at the very name of King Decimal.

In the end the excitement grew passionate. It was like the tuning up of a great orchestra, when every player fiddles with his instrument in the desperate hope of getting it right before the conductor raises his baton. If it went on much longer everyone would be too exhausted to put on a smile when King Decimal did arrive.

Having little part to play, Leo wisely kept out of the way. The king scarcely heeded him, being busy all day with the tailor, the hairdresser and the chiefs of the palace staff. He was never far removed from bad temper; and Queen Madge kept about the same distance from it as she chivvied the chefs and the housekeepers from pillar to post and back. Even the princesses were less than their cheerful selves, as they hurried about performing the little duties their mother was too busy to do.

And even on the morning of King Decimal's arrival it seemed that nothing would be ready on time. He was due in the royal train at 11.17 sharp, and it was only by a miracle that King Purple stepped into the Rolls-Rex at eleven o'clock, fully dressed and prepared.

From an upper front window Leo looked into the courtyard and saw the Rolls-Rex depart for the station. The palace railings were festooned with garlands, and the citizens clustered outside carried the flags of both nations.

As far down the street as his eyesight allowed, Leo saw coloured streamers and emblems, and the pavements were lined with people waiting.

He watched the car until it disappeared, then he returned to his room to brush his hair for the sixteenth time and admire once again his new motley suit.

He was surprised to find Prince Florizel stretched on his bed reading one of his books.

'Oh, hullo,' said the prince. 'Forgive me for creeping in like this. I did knock, honestly, but you weren't in. Do you mind? Oh, Leo, I do so dread Uncle Decimal's visit—I always call him Uncle, though he's really a sort of cousin—I don't like him, Leo; he makes me feel creepy. So I came here to sort of hide—has he come yet?—do you mind?'

Although Florizel at his best never struck one as the strongest, most powerful of princes, Leo had not seen him nervous like this. There was a pleading look in his face, as though he needed encouragement.

'Not at all,' Leo answered brightly; 'stay as long as you like.' He settled himself in a chair, comfortably but not so as to crease his clothes. 'But what', he asked, 'don't you like about the king?'

'Everything. I'm afraid of him, Leo. I think Daddy is too. Sometimes I think we all are, except Mother and Granny. And Aunt Livia—Queen Livia—she scares me too. They don't like me, Leo, because one day I shall be king of Patria instead of him. The awful thing is, I always seem to feel ill when he comes. Even now I'm working up for a cold or something. The Royal Physician has looked me over: he says I'm all right really, but he's going to keep an eye on me. Uncle Decimal thinks by this that I'm *always* ill. He *hopes* I am, Leo. He would like me to die so he could be king. But I'm not going to die, Leo; why

should I, just to please him? I'm *going* to be king when my proper turn comes.'

Prince Florizel sat up, with eyes blinking and lips trembling. He looked about to cry, until Leo put on a big smile to encourage him.

'Cheer up,' said Leo, 'he can't really hurt you. You needn't see much of him after all, need you? And if you feel uncomfortable and I happen to be there, just look across at me and we'll laugh inside ourselves at the same time.'

'Yes, let's,' said the prince. He lay down and gazed at the ceiling. 'Leo,' he went on, 'do you hope we can always be friends?'

'I sincerely hope so.'

'So do I. You're such a—such a *comfortable* sort of person!'

'Am I?' said Leo, grinning happily. 'I'm so glad, truly I am.'

'And the thought makes me feel so much better,' the prince said, springing up with a livelier change of mood. 'Sing something, Leo, will you?'

Leo got up to fetch his guitar. 'What would you like?' he asked.

'Can't you guess?'

'"Philomel"—or should it be "Florizel"?' Leo said with a smile.

The prince nodded.

'As you will. And I've thought up some new words to it. I'll teach them to you, and we'll sing them together:

'Florizel, Florizel:

Last descendant of a thousand kings——'

'Humbly clings to Leo's apron-strings,' added Florizel with a rather shamefaced grin.

They were still singing when the royal train pulled in at Platform 1, seventeen minutes late. A strip of red carpet led all the way from King Decimal's carriage to the waiting Rolls-Rex, with officials standing on each side of it. There was no mistaking the royal train as it bore into sight with its whistle blowing, for a huge metal crown surmounted the funnel, while the crossed flags of Prug and Patria decorated the front of the engine.

The train fetched up beautifully, avoiding the buffers by no more than a thumb's breadth, and a hearty cheer greeted the royal visitors. It was no less than the superintendent of the railway himself who opened the door of the king's carriage, while lesser folk took charge of the retinue's doors. There was a moment of waiting; then out stepped King Decimal followed by Queen Livia. The king wore a splendid new cutaway coat, with striped trousers and a grey top-hat. He was a well-built king, with a red, plumpish face and a black, somewhat cruel-looking moustache. As he stepped down the officials saw him scowling at his watch, and they felt ashamed that their second-finest engine could not this once have run to time.

The queen was in white with a straw picture-hat, from which wisps of her hair kept unrolling. Although not yet old enough to look like a witch, there was something in her appearance which suggested broomsticks and black cats and cold moonlight. Neither she nor the king looked the sort you could ask to a party and feel I'm so *glad* they can come.

King Purple gallantly hid his feelings as he held out both hands and cried: 'Welcome to Patria, my dear cousin Decimal, and you, Livia!'

'Oh, hullo there, Purple,' retorted King Decimal, 'how goes it? You're not looking any younger.'



Queen Livia said, 'Morning, Purple. These *trains* of yours!'

Then there were handshakings with all the officials, and scufflings and scramblings among King Decimal's attendants, and somehow room was found for everybody in the waiting cars. The procession moved off and proceeded to the palace at a courtly pace so that the crowds in the street might have a longer glimpse of the royal visitors.

At the main gates the sentries presented arms, and one of them put out his tongue at King Decimal's back, although he swore later he was only moistening his lips.

'What time is luncheon?' asked Queen Livia as she stepped out of the Rolls-Rex.

'Just as soon as you want it,' King Purple replied, hoping that if she said 'now' the chef would be ready.

'Now, I think,' said the queen. 'Decimal and I are famished.'

'Tell the queen,' whispered King Purple to the chamberlain who stood by.

In Leo's room he and Prince Florizel were still singing when the palace gongs boomed for luncheon.

'Oh, goodness,' the prince said, 'I'd no idea it was so late. I suppose I'd better not be ill. Are you coming in? What about your lunch?'

'I seem to have missed it,' said Leo. 'Yes, I'll follow you in a moment or two.'

In the dining-hall the seating had been rearranged to allow for the visitors. Many of the high tables were pushed lower down, and an extra table accommodated the overflow. The royal party hadn't appeared, and all eyes watched the door they would come through. The reader was absent, and the bookrest in front of the king stood empty. Leo wondered if he too was really needed.

Suddenly the loudspeakers burst into the Prug National Anthem, and everyone stiffened politely for the entry of King Decimal and Queen Livia.

'Turn that thing off!' snapped King Decimal to nobody in particular. 'I'm sick of the tune!'

He gathered up his coat-tails, sat down heavily, and scowled at all the faces around. Queen Livia was saying something to the dowager queen, while Queen Madge took a last-minute glimpse to make sure they were all in their proper places. The princesses sat close together as if seeking safety in each other, and Prince Florizel stared fixedly at the plate in front of him.

The banquet began with all the dishes that, as far as could be remembered, the royal guests preferred. And gradually King Decimal looked pleasanter as the food and drink cheered him. It was a silent meal, all things considered, although the household officials did their best to make conversation with their opposite numbers from Prug.

Leo, feeling it best not to interfere, sat on his stool near King Purple and tried to look out of the way. Once or twice King Decimal and Queen Livia looked his way, but took no more notice of him than if he had been a statue until, during a silence, the queen asked King Purple: 'What became of that fool of yours—Jack, wasn't that his name?—the old fool you used to keep.'

'Jack,' said the king. 'Ah yes, old Jack. Old Jack retired to Corona a short time ago. Capital fellow; real old-fashioned sense of humour.'

'Can't think why you go on with 'em,' put in King Decimal, with a sideways glance at Leo; 'quite out of date. You want to move with the times a bit more, be modern. What do you say, eh, Florizel?' he barked across at the prince.

'I'm sorry, I wasn't listening,' said Florizel, coming out of a daydream.

'I said you want to keep up with the times, what?'

'Oh yes, Uncle Decimal.'

'What's the matter, boy: why do you mumble? Feeling ill?'

'Oh no, Uncle Decimal.'

'Then speak up, boy! Speak up like my lads do. Why, if they didn't answer me manfully, I'd thrash 'em until they did.'

'Yes, Uncle Decimal,' the prince answered miserably.

'That boy of yours,' said King Decimal to Queen Madge, less loudly but loud enough for Leo to hear, 'he doesn't get any stronger. Poor lad, I sometimes wonder—'

'He's well enough, thank you,' the queen replied coldly.

'He is? Ah, well—' The king shrugged his shoulders and looked none too pleased.

Leo watched Prince Florizel until he looked up and caught his eye. Leo winked very gently and Florizel looked less unhappy. And after lunch Florizel slipped away to find Leo again and take heart in his company.

In the evening there was a Royal Command Performance at the Opera House. They played *Madame Buffalo*, which is a great favourite in Patria, being cheerful and melodious. The whole house was packed with magnificent guests in silks and furs, while diamonds and rubies glittered and glowed. The king and queen of Prug received a storm of cheers and hand-clapping. So did the king and queen of Patria—many persons, indeed, remarked that *their* applause was longer and stronger.

Be as that may, the evening's entertainment seemed to please the royal visitors, who did not get to bed until

three in the morning. ‘And that’, mumbled King Purple to himself as he flopped into his bed, ‘is nearly a day gone. Only thirteen more.’

It needed a strong constitution to keep up with the programme arranged for King Decimal. Banquet followed banquet, ball followed ball; there were hospitals and institutions to visit, new plays to see, garden parties and fireworks to attend, foundation stones to be laid, and even a statue to unveil.

All this King Decimal did with as good a grace as he could summon. Queen Livia sometimes excused herself and retired to her room with a book, but on the whole she lent the king her support. The brunt of the effort fell upon King Purple and Queen Madge, since it was they who helped to arrange these things as well as attend them.

Throughout this time Leo kept much in the background, for the king was too busy to need him. None of the household seemed eager for contact with King Decimal, and the Princesses Albina and Amnesia avoided him as carefully as their brother did.

Prince Florizel’s visits to Leo became a regular occurrence. He would sneak in at all hours and give him the story of the latest happenings. King Decimal did so and so today—he struck his secretary, or broke the door of his cupboard because the key fell out. Queen Livia scolded her lady-in-waiting and gave her hysterics. The king twice said this or that naughty word; he called Daddy a skinflint; he said Mother ought to dress better. Queen Livia complained of the fish, said it was bad, said if it were *her* chef she would boil him in his own oil.

And one day Prince Florizel came in woefully distressed. ‘Oh, Leo, I’ve just been with Uncle Decimal and Aunt Livia; I just *couldn’t* get away from them. They said they wanted a private talk, so they locked the door,

and Uncle Decimal began asking about my illnesses. So I said I felt all right, thank you, and Aunt Livia asked why I always had to have the physician in attendance if I was all right. So I said I didn't know, except sometimes I had headaches and colds. Aunt Livia said: "Oh, is that all?"—but in such a funny way that I felt frightened. She looked as if she was going to put a spell on me, or something. Then Uncle Decimal asked if I wanted to be a king one day, so I said "of course". So he said: "Take my advice and don't." So I said I hadn't any choice, because Patria expected it. Then Aunt Livia said I could always refuse, so I asked what would happen to Patria, because Patria had always had a king and expected it.'

'What did the queen say then?' Leo asked.

'She didn't say anything,' Florizel continued, 'and suddenly I realized what they were after. They wanted me to die, and if I didn't die they wanted me to hand over the crown to them. So I said, "I know what you're after." Aunt Livia looked a bit awkward, but Uncle Decimal looked angry. He said I mustn't dare mention a word of what they'd said to Mother and Daddy, otherwise it would be the worse for me. Then I came away.'

Leo paced up and down the room several times. 'Look, Florizel,' he said, 'I don't think you need worry; there's nothing they can make you do. After all, you have right on your side.'

'It wouldn't help me against those two,' the prince answered doubtfully; 'not if they *really* meant anything.'

'Perhaps it was just a try-on. Anyway, they'll be gone in a day or two.'

Because of King Decimal's love of sport, his last day in Patria was to be spent in shooting over the Corona estate. This was his farewell to Patria, for he had ordered his

own car to meet him at Corona and return him to Prug by road. His retinue he sent back by ordinary train, leaving him with Queen Livia and one attendant apiece.

Soon after dawn the royal hunting-party drove away from the palace. Compared with Princess Albina's birthday excursion it was a small party, only a very select few being invited. But King Purple, Queen Madge, the princesses, Prince Florizel: they were all going, to give the royal visitors a suitable send-off.

King Purple had ransacked his armoury to provide King Decimal with the best guns he owned, and the last car was stacked with every sort of equipment for the shoot. Their four Majesties drove ahead in the Rolls-Rex, but there was little conversation on the way, for it had been a short night's sleep for them all and as yet they were barely awake. At intervals one or other would nod and fall into a short nap, waking up with a jerk when the car lurched or bounced extra sharply.

They were all fast asleep when the Rolls-Rex pulled up before the mansion, and the footman who opened the door had to stand a long time before they came to. Then another brought sherry and biscuits, which put a little life into them.

While preparations were being made King Decimal's car arrived from Prug after a long night drive. It rolled up magnificently purring, and rather unkindly stopped close to the Rolls-Rex, where it looked like a racehorse showing off beside a work-weary carthorse. A smaller, but in its way equally splendid limousine followed soon after, although it scarcely seemed necessary.

Now the party, or those that had come to shoot, was ready to split up. The head keeper, who knew every inch of the estate, waited on King Decimal, while King Purple contented himself with the chief under-keeper. The other

five guns were assigned under-keepers in order of rank and importance.

'See that His Majesty is shown the best sport Corona provides,' said King Purple to the head keeper.

'Ay, sire,' the keeper said, as he hitched the game bag round his neck and took up the king's guns.

'Have a pleasant morning,' exclaimed Queen Madge to the party at large.

'And mind you look after the prince,' said Queen Livia to King Decimal.

For the king had particularly invited Prince Florizel to accompany him. The prince, though not eager, made no complaint on King Decimal's last day. While the king had his sport he would tick off the hours of which so few remained.

'And don't be too late back,' Queen Livia said.

'No,' grunted King Decimal; 'better send the car round to meet us at the far end of the big wood. Let it wait by the roadside.'

The party set off towards the lake where a few birds might be found. In Patria sportsmen will shoot anything that flies, for there are no laws against it and nothing is ever out of season. The stay-at-homes watched them go, and as soon as they heard the first bang they retired to the mansion for coffee and talk.

At the lakeside the party split up, King Decimal choosing to wander afield with the prince and the keeper, as far on their own as could be. The king walked with long, powerful strides which Prince Florizel found hard to keep up with; even the keeper looked worried.

The king, though a keen shot, was never an accurate one; and many a small bird had cause to be glad of its smallness as powder and shot whistled harmlessly past it. But the king accepted his failures without overmuch bad

temper, and kept the keeper hard at work loading and unloading the guns.

In the distance they heard shots fired everywhere, although the others were now out of sight. King Decimal strode on with unflagging purpose, pausing only to fire at a rabbit or bird, then proceeding at full tilt. As the morning grew hotter so Florizel suffered more. He wished the king would sit down and rest, if only for five minutes. Really, if he didn't rest soon he just *couldn't* keep it up!

'Uncle Decimal!' he gasped at length.

'Quiet, boy, you'll frighten the game!'

'Sorry, Uncle Decimal, but will you please, please go a tiny bit slower?'

King Decimal glanced at him in contempt.

'A prince who is to be a king must discipline himself,' he said.

In the big wood they had perforce to walk more slowly: even so Florizel found it a hard task to cope with the brambles and undergrowth at the pace the king tackled them. But he gallantly struggled on, not daring to protest any more, although at any moment he felt ready to fall down exhausted.

Then they emerged from the wood, and there stood King Decimal's second car. The prince could have wept with relief.

'Dear me,' said the king with a peep at his watch, 'so soon? I feel in no way ready to return yet. I'll dismiss the car,' he added, narrowly watching Prince Florizel's face, 'and walk back.'

'Oh, Uncle,' the prince gasped in spite of himself.

'Tired, eh?' said the king, suddenly sympathetic. 'Well, I'll tell you what. You shall drive back alone, while the fellow and I make it on foot. How's that, eh?'

Prince Florizel nodded gratefully, feeling sorry for the keeper who was still breathing hard.

'Hop in, then,' said the king; and to the chauffeur, 'take His Highness back.'

The keeper said afterwards he was certain King Decimal made a grimace at the chauffeur and muttered something private to him.

CHAPTER X

KING DECIMAL WAS the last to return to the mansion, where he found the others awaiting him. He hesitated, looking none too pleased, until a private gesture from Queen Livia bade him hurry up.

'Good sport?' asked King Purple.

'Excellent,' King Decimal replied, holding up a skylark and two blackbirds for his admiration. 'And now, Purple, it's time Livia and I were off.'

'Where's Florizel?' asked Queen Madge.

'Florizel, Florizel?' repeated the king, as though searching his memory. 'Why, I sent him back in the car.'

'Well, he isn't back yet. How long ago did he start?'

'Oh, not long,' said King Decimal. 'I should say—' He saw the head keeper watching him. 'Here, fellow, here's something for your pains; now go along with you. I should say,' he resumed, 'oh, not very long. Come, Livia, we must waste no more time.' He seemed terribly anxious to leave.

'It's very strange,' Princess Albina said, 'he should have been back before you.'

'Oh, he probably told the chauffeur to drive slowly, or to stop somewhere to see somebody.' An inspiration suddenly seized King Decimal. 'No, no, of course—I know what it is! The poor lad was dead tired, so I ordered the chauffeur to drive him straight back to Pelt. That's it, of course; how silly of me to forget!

'Well, that's kind of you,' King Purple said gratefully. 'And now, if you really won't stay for some tea—'

'No, no,' answered Queen Livia. 'It's a long journey.'

The last farewells passed quickly and informally. The two kings shook hands, the two queens kissed, the guests bowed or curtsied, and presently King Decimal's car purred and rolled softly away.

For a moment the gathering stood like a waxwork group. Then, as if they were a trained choir, they gasped for relief with a sound of escaping steam. One and all felt the inrush of a mighty good temper.

'Just think, my dear,' remarked King Purple on the homeward journey, 'no more daily treats: operas, parties, balls.'

'No more banquets,' the queen added happily.

'No more burning good money in fireworks.'

'Or drinking good money in unnecessary champagne.'

'Or keeping up party manners.'

'And think,' cooed the queen, putting the finishing touch to it: 'tonight we can all go to bed early.'

Queen Madge could not have foreseen it, but there would be precious little sleep for anyone in the palace that night. But for half an hour after their return Their Majesties' good spirits continued. At the end of that time the old nurse hustled in to inquire where the prince was.

'His Highness?' the queen said. 'I assumed he had gone.'

straight to bed after King Decimal's chauffeur brought him home.'

'No chauffeur did no such thing,' answered the nurse.

'But he must have left Corona a good hour or two before we did.'

'Then he didn't arrive a good hour or two before,' said the nurse, 'and the Rolls-Rex is not all that swift.'

The queen gave a shrug. 'Perhaps something held them up. A puncture, or something like that. I remember how once the king and I were delayed for an hour for such a reason. Let me know after dinner.'

At dinner-time Leo noticed a sort of anxiety at the high table. It must be because they were tired, he thought; and with this end in view he sang only the cheer-fullest songs into the king's ear.

He learnt the cause afterwards, and soon the whole palace was full of the news. Prince Florizel had not returned.

'We're *bound* to hear soon,' said the king for the hundredth time. His mind dwelt on accidents; he could see King Decimal's car a heap of wreckage with Florizel crushed inside. '*Bound* to hear,' he repeated; 'bad news travels fast.'

'Why don't you send out messages?' suggested the queen.

'To whom?' asked the king.

'I don't know. Well, at any rate, you could send out the guard in the cars to scour the roads between here and Corona.'

'I can do that,' agreed the king miserably.

He gave orders for every available car to set out and not to return without news.

'We will wait up,' he said to the queen.

They retired to the smaller gilt salon where they sat

in two high chairs facing each other. Now and then they would sigh and consult the clock. The frowns on their faces grew deeper and sadder.

'This is awful!' the king murmured. A little tear escaped him and trickled down the lines of his drawn face. 'Awful,' he repeated ten minutes later.

Queen Madge stirred herself. 'Now Purple,' she said, 'it's no use to brood. There is every hope of his safe return.'

'That's all very well,' replied the king mournfully, 'but I can't keep my mind off it.'

'You need cheering up,' answered the queen. She arose and pulled the nearest bell-rope. 'Tell Leo to attend His Majesty here at once,' she commanded the footman. 'We'll see if your precious jester can't help you,' she said.

When Leo came in a few minutes later, rubbing his eyes, he saw a very ordinary couple made simple and human by suffering. 'I'm so sorry,' he said. 'I wasn't in bed, but I must have fallen asleep in my chair waiting for news. Is there any?'

The king shook his head. 'Play him something to make him forget for a while,' said the queen.

Leo sang to the king and queen over and over again, while the hands of the clock ate up the small hours of the morning. No one came to disturb them with good news or bad. The palace was hushed, although in every room people lay awake pondering. . . .

It was Queen Madge who nodded first. Her head drooped a degree at a time, until it could droop no more. Her breathing was deep and unbroken. 'Can you manage another?' the king asked quietly. 'It does me so much good, so much good.'

Leo gave him a smile that was half a yawn, and dreamily touched the strings again. He could think by now only of slumber songs, songs that made himself want

to sleep. He hardly knew what he sang, so hard was he fighting against it.

*Peace in this household, our watch we will keep.
My heart's in the Highlands a-chasing the sheep.*

—‘No, that’s not it:’

Peace in your farmstead, and——



‘Poor lad!’ muttered the king, too weary to pick up the guitar which had fallen from the hands of the sleeping Leo. ‘Poooor laaad, aaah! ’

It was the Lord Chamberlain who found them at seven in the morning, huddled like three sacks and dead to the world.

The guards came back by ones and twos towards mid-day. It was an incomplete story they pieced together. Yes,

between them they had scoured every lane between here and Corona. No, not a trace of the car, either smashed-up or whole. Not a soul they had spoken to recollecting seeing it pass. No, of course they might not have noticed it—except that it did bear the Prug coat-of-arms on the doors.

Then a motor-cyclist rushed into the king's presence.

'Your Majesty—news!' he gasped. 'Guess what I did! I drove all the way to the frontier and spoke to the frontier guard. The car passed through last evening, some time before the king and queen in their car.'

'Was the prince inside?'

'The guard didn't notice. Being a royal car he let it pass without question. But there was something lying on the back seat wrapped up in a sack. Could it have been a person? I asked. The guard said it could, only it wasn't likely seeing that persons don't travel in sacks. "So!" I said. So I came rushing back.'

'I see,' said King Purple thoughtfully.

But he didn't see at first, not daring to believe his suspicions. King Decimal, he knew, was capable of strange tricks and underhand actions. King Decimal, he knew, wanted Florizel out of the way. But would even King Decimal go so far as to kidnap the prince? And how could they find this out?—it was not for one king to accuse another of so unregal an act.

Queen Madge had fewer scruples. 'A fig for diplomacy!' said she. 'The whole thing is clear as clear. Decimal's a scoundrel, and there's an end of it. You must not hesitate to accuse him bluntly.'

'But my dear,' protested the king. 'Give me time. We've no proof, no proof at all.'

'No proof is needed,' the queen said. 'Now, drop everything else and get in touch with Decimal.'

First of all the king ordered the court to keep silent about the matter; above all not to voice their suspicions. He might as well try to prevent the tide flowing. The court buzzed with rumours, and soon whispers floated through the air to the outside world. It was as if a plague spread over Pelt, and from Pelt throughout Patria. Prince Florizel disappears, Prince Florizel missing, Prince Florizel captured, Prince Florizel murdered! It can't be, the people of Patria said: princes don't fade into air just like that. It's a lie, said some, put out by the king's enemies. Why doesn't the king deny it—why don't the papers print something about it?

King Purple fretted with impatience waiting for a long-distance telephone call. 'We have made the connection,' the chief operator said, 'but King Decimal is out of his palace.' 'Keep trying,' the king said, 'and never mind the expense.'

Then King Decimal's voice rumbled over the wire. 'Yes—who? Purple?—how nice to hear you. Livia and I were just saying how much we enjoyed our little visit. In fact, Livia is writing a thank-you letter this minute. . . . Florizel, did you say? What about him? Not returned?—it's impossible. Why, the chauffeur came back quite safe. . . . Of course I'm sure. . . . Anyway, I'll have him brought here for questioning, and I'll ring you back to let you know what he says.'

'What does he say?' asked Queen Madge eagerly.

'He is going to question the chauffeur, and ring back.'

'A put-up job: question my foot!' snapped the queen. 'He won't ring back.'

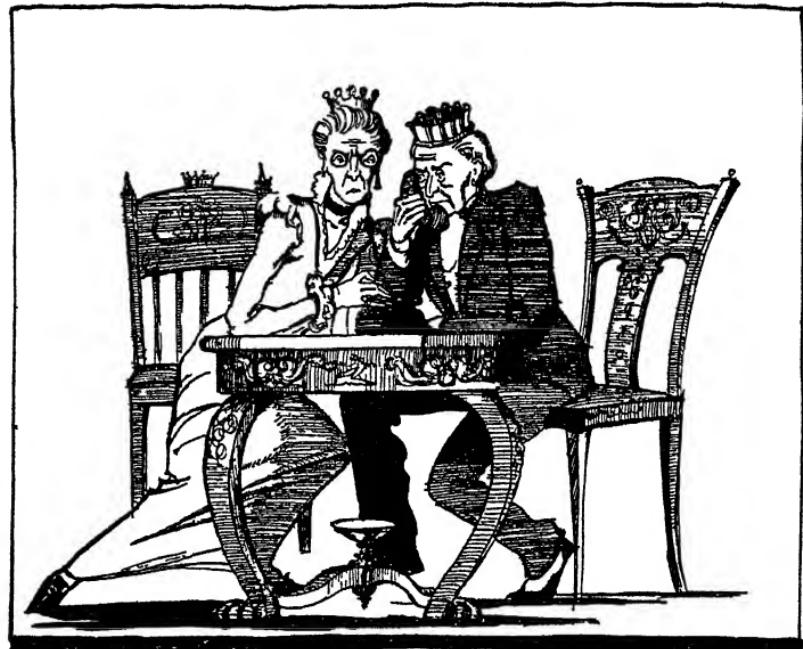
But in a surprisingly short time King Decimal did as he promised.

'I've questioned the chauffeur,' he said, 'and he tells me he put Florizel down a little way from the palace.'

Florizel told him he wanted to walk the rest, get the stiffness out of his joints.'

'Oh,' King Purple replied, quite at a loss.

'What's that . . . Oh? Well, sorry I can't help. Let me know if he turns up. Let me know also,' he added in a way that was most sinister, 'if he doesn't.'



'What's he say?' hissed Queen Madge who was straining her ear close to the receiver.

'He said,' answered the king, putting his hand over the mouthpiece, 'that the chauffeur set Florizel down near the palace. Florizel wanted to walk the rest.'

'It's a lie!' exclaimed the queen, flaring up. 'Florizel never walked two paces if he could help it. Here, give me the king: I'll make Decimal tell me the truth.'

But by this time King Decimal had rung off.

CHAPTER XI

DAY FOLLOWED DAY with no news of the prince. The papers came out with the story, covering half the front page with thick headlines: PRINCE FLORIZEL LOST—WHERE IS THE HEIR?—H.R.H. VANISHES—FLORIZEL? After printing such scanty details as they could rake up, the editors painted a gloomy picture of Patria's future. 'After King Purple, What?' asked the *Pelt Times*, and went on to give the answer that everyone knew only too well. 'A foreign king,' it said, 'lately in this country on an official visit, will receive the news with feelings vastly different from those of Loyal Patrians. . . . No Loyal Patrian should rest content until this point is settled: Where is Prince Florizel?'

A week passed while daily the papers kept the subject before the people's eyes. It was all very well to be told that everything was being done to discover what had happened—but what use was everything if nothing resulted from it? A missing heir was no more consolation to Patria than a dead one—less, perhaps; for with a dead prince you knew, alas, just where you were.

All this time King Purple felt, and looked, the unhappiest king in the world. If only he knew, if only he knew! 'I know Decimal's made off with him,' he moaned: 'bother him, bother him!' He was making himself ill.

'Your Majesty must eat,' said the Royal Physician.

'Your Majesty must get more sleep.'

'Your Majesty must be patient.'

'Your Majesty must stop worrying.'

'Your Majesty *can* stop worrying,' said the Astrologer Royal excitedly. 'I've reworked His Highness's horoscope.

It says that the day he disappeared was his unlucky day, but—it says there are luckier days ahead. And since there are luckier days ahead, it means that the prince still lives.'

'They mean so well,' King Purple confided to Leo, 'but oh, it doesn't help.'

'I suppose', Leo said slowly, struck by a thought, 'you couldn't go to King Decimal yourself? Unofficially, friendlily, I mean, as though you were asking his advice. And then—well, I'm sure you could somehow find out if he really does know where the prince is.'

The king pondered. 'My dear young fellow, I believe there is something in that,' he said.

'Madge,' he said to the queen after he had pondered for another day and a night, 'I've had an idea. I'm going to see Decimal, talk to him as man to man and, if necessary, dash it, throw myself on his mercy.'

'He has none,' the queen answered.

'None at all, I agree. But, don't you see, while I'm in Prug I can keep an ear open for whispers of Florizel—spy a bit, don't you see?'

It took nearly an hour's arguing to convince Queen Madge, but the argument strengthened the king's resolve. He *would* go, come what might: and alone. A lone ageing king, pleading (if the worst came to the worst) for the return of his only son (if his only son were after all in King Decimal's hands)—the very thought of it, the pathos, brought tears to his mind's eye.

'I'll leave in the morning,' he said.

At the edge of the airfield, athwart the main runway, the royal plane stood oiled and greased, tuned up and ready to take off. It was a large plane, and long ago when he first bought it the king had chosen this one because it

looked safe and solid. Also it had four engines, which was very consoling: for if one or other failed (as quite often it did) there were still three to rely on. Another thing was that in times of extra economy he could save petrol by running on two engines only. Everyone, in fact, agreed that though King Purple's plane lacked the grace of the swan or the speed of the hawk, it only felt unsafe when it ran across bad weather or banged into an extra large bird.

Few were present to see the king leave: only the airport officials and his chauffeur. He looked as ordinary as any ordinary traveller, with his grey suit, felt hat and a small weekend suitcase. An attendant helped him up the steps and left him alone in the cabin. Through the window they saw him selecting his seat, then changing his mind and moving from one to another, then sitting bolt upright and staring ahead. Then the pilot and his friend clambered into their cabin, the engines burst into lively anger, and the royal plane began to move.

In a few seconds it was in the air, first low then high above Pelt. The onlookers watched until the royal markings could no longer be seen, and the plane was no more than a speck wheeling round till it nosed out the direction of Gulch.

'God bless him,' said one, 'and bring him luck in whatever his mission may be!'

Queen Madge spent the day hovering about the palace awaiting the king's promised news of his safe arrival in Gulch. Most of the time she hovered in her boudoir, watching the telephone as cunningly as one watches the last seat in Musical Chairs. Each time it rang she pounced on it before it could change its mind; but each time it wasn't the king.

At luncheon she snapped at everybody within hearing,

her anxiety bringing out the worst of her temper. She ate only little, refusing dish after dish and sending away what she did take half-eaten.

'He *must* be there by now,' she remarked to a lady-in-waiting.

'Remember, though, ma'am, there is an hour's difference between the time in Gulch and the time in Pelt.'

'Yes, so there is,' said the queen, feeling a moment's relief. 'Though what difference that makes,' she added, after turning it over in her mind for about half an hour, 'I should be pleased for you to explain.'

'Yes, ma'am—er, no, ma'am,' stammered the lady-in-waiting.

The queen settled down again by the telephone. She picked up a book of verses and read the first seventeen pages. But nothing made sense to her, so she put it down. *Bother King Purple!*—why didn't he call? Count a hundred slowly, and if there was no news by then she would telephone King Decimal herself....

She closed her eyes and began. '*Un, deux, trois*'—she was counting in French because then she had to think, and that took longer... '*Trente-deux, trente-trois, trente-quatre*'—she was getting through famously... 'Oh, *do* hurry up, Purple! *Soixante-sept, soixante-huit, soixante-neuf*'—what was seventy? Sixty-ten, yes: '*Soixante-dix, soixante-et-onze, soixante-douze*...' This is really no fun, thought the queen: I'll give him a little longer—I'll begin again in German. '*Eins, zwei, drei, vier, fünf, sechs*'—what is it, Margharita? No, I shall not be down to dinner.' Where was I? Start again. *Bother* that wretched Purple! Supposing he's had an accident? But kings don't have accidents, they have divine rights. '*Trentuno, Trentadue, trentatre*',—and what's the Italian for forty?—'*quaranta*'.

What with one little interruption and another, it was close on midnight before the queen reached a hundred in any language. By that time she was ready for action. Decisively she pulled every bell-rope in her boudoir, and soon the corridor was filled with the patterning of feet.

'Now,' the queen said to the assembly of chambermaids, footmen and ladies-in-waiting: 'no matter what means you devise to avoid delay, I demand that I be put in touch with His Majesty on the telephone this instant. Hurry away and lose not a second!'

When the queen gave an order there was never any question of disobeying. There was a scramble for the door while Her Majesty returned to her chair by the telephone. Many times during the next half-hour she lifted the receiver to ask, in a deeper and growlier way, why the king had still not come through. 'Crossed lines my foot!' she snapped at the terrified operator: 'Uncross them, idiot! Not another word of excuse!'

Eventually the bell did ring, and as if to make up for lost time about four voices came through at once. 'Get off the line!' snapped Queen Madge, and a female voice dropped out. 'Be quiet when *I'm* talking!' she snapped again; then there were two. 'Hullo?' she said loudly: 'hullo?' The high-pitched voice decided it wasn't for him. 'Is that you, Purple, you? Hullo, hullo!'

'Hullo,' came the answer: 'hullo-hullo, who *is* that? Madge? No, this isn't Purple, it's Decimal. How on earth did you manage to get through to me by mistake?'

'It wasn't a mistake. At least—now listen, please.' Queen Madge bit her lip and controlled herself. Then she explained as best she could, and leaned back to hear what King Decimal had to say.

'Purple?' said he: 'not a sign of him. Coming to see me? He certainly hasn't arrived. Are you sure he left? . . .

This morning, by air? Hmm!—no, nothing. Any news of Florizel? . . . My poor Madge, you *are* in a bad way. . . . Of course I'll let you know, of course . . . do everything I can . . . send out a search party if need be. . . . Well, good-bye. My regards to Purple and Florizel. What?—Oh, how silly of me. . . . Well, my regards to the girls. Good-bye.'

If Queen Madge had not been so strong a woman she would probably have fainted on the spot. As it was her brain merely whirled round and round. *Florizel missing*—*the king missing*—*Florizel*—*Purple*—*Decimal*—*Florizel*—*Decimal*—*Purple*—*Decimal*—*Prug* . . .

'It's that king again!' she cried out loud, as she slowly stood up and stared at nothing with wide-open eyes. 'That treacherous, tyrannous, infamous, envious Decimal! He captures my son, then he captures the king. Then he puts on an innocent voice and pretends he knows nothing. And soon he will lay claim to our throne. Oh, the cunning of the monster: oh, the cold, cruel cunning! Alas for poor Patria: alas for her people! Alas, alas for me!'

And then, only then—and strong as she was—Queen Madge raised her arms and sank to the floor unconscious.

King Decimal had been asleep when the telephone called him, but there was nothing sleepy about him as he struggled into his dressing-gown and slippers. 'Livia, Livia,' he called as he banged at her door and rushed in before she had time to wake and cry 'Burglars!'

'Livia, Livia, what do you make of this? Old Purple apparently flew over to visit me early this morning, and he hasn't arrived. Poor old Madge has just been on the 'phone.'

'Oh?' murmured Queen Livia, not quite ready to take it all in.

'Think,' said the king, 'just think. If anything's hap-

pened to him—and in that old flying box-kite of his it's a wonder nothing has happened before—Patria falls right into our hands.'

'Supposing he's safe, though?'

'Yes, yes: there's always a chance. But if he is, where is he?'

'He could be anywhere. He could be in Patria equally as well as in Prug. He could have landed anywhere at all.'

'Then why haven't we heard? If a king makes a landing the news soon gets round.'

'He could', said the queen, 'have landed in the wilderness, where news travels slowly.'

'And be alive or dead.'

'Or even lost.'

The king pulled at his moustache and looked thoroughly evil. 'If we could find him and keep it dark——' he said.

'If——' said the queen.

'Why not? I've promised poor old Madge to have the country searched.'

'Then,' said the queen, 'you could forbid the finders to mention a word to anybody.'

'On pain of death.'

'Or under threat of having their tongues cut out.'

'Precisely. On the other hand we could ensure silence with a handsome reward.'

'Which, though more ordinary, is more conducive to loyalty.'

'And then,' said the king, 'we know what to do.'

'Precisely the same', said the queen, 'as in the case of a subject we don't even discuss between ourselves.'

'And after that, the road to Patria——' said the king.

'—lies open,' the queen said.

CHAPTER XII

THE ROYAL PLANE flew solidly ahead through a spotlessly clean blue sky. King Purple sat bolt upright still, staring ahead, with his eye resting on the notice which said DANGER OF FIRE. NO SMOKING (EXCEPT BY THE KING). But the king had no wish to smoke. He only wanted one thing: to be in Gulch as quickly as possible, finish his errand, and return.

They crossed the boundary between Patria and Prug high out of reach of the frontier guards and the customs officials. The plane swayed a little as a family of air-currents rushed up from the boundary hills and played with it joyfully. It steadied itself again over the plains; and over the first town, which looked like a toy-town, it was running as smoothly as could be.

Then they came to the wild tract of country called the Forest of Goosejaw. It was a vast, lonely, haunted sort of land—mile upon mile of brambles and bracken with sometimes a scrubby wood, sometimes a lake, and sometimes a clearing where foolhardy peasants would settle in the hope of sweating a living out of the soil. So wild and so useless was the Forest that it had never been properly put on the map. There was nothing to tempt visitors, no hotels and few roads: the Forest of Goosejaw went almost disregarded. Travellers, seeing it from the air, would shudder and say: 'What a place to be stranded in!'

The king was thinking that now, as he allowed his gaze to wander out of the window. The pilot's friend was saying to the pilot: '*What a place to be stranded in!*' and the pilot was thinking the same as he climbed higher to get even farther away from it.

It seemed to the three that they were the only people alive in the whole world. Not a bird kept them company throughout the whole sky. Earth, sky and themselves belonged only to each other. It was an uneventful world, a world which you only knew to be moving because you could see it passing below you. But you didn't have to think and you didn't have to listen. You only heard the drone of the engines. . . .

The door of the king's cabin burst open, and in rushed the pilot's friend in a state of agitation.

'Quick, sir, quick: put this on!' he gasped.

The king drew himself out of a half-sleep and stared stupidly at the parachute tendered to him.

'Get up, sir, we're in danger!' The pilot's friend lugged the king out of his seat and expertly fastened the parachute round him.

'Eh, what, what,' demanded King Purple; 'what is it?'

Instead of answering, the pilot's friend drew him to an opposite window and pointed at the far engine which was spurting out fire and smoke.

'We've got to abandon the craft,' he shouted, 'there's no other hope.'

Already the plane was behaving uncertainly, swerving and dipping. Already the flames had discovered how easy the wing fabric was to consume. Already the pilot was preparing to jump and wondering why the others kept him waiting.

The pilot's friend guided the king to the rear door. 'Now listen, sir,' he said firmly as he unlocked it: 'even if you've never jumped before it's quite easy. You count three and pull this cord sharply—so! Are you ready?'

'No, no,' pleaded the king.

'Then there's only one thing to do.' The pilot's friend threw open the door and tossed the king out. . . .

The king fell a long way before he collected enough wits to remember his instructions. One, two, three—pull the cord! He continued to twist and turn. Pull again—so! The only effect was to make him feel as if someone were strangling him. Over and over, now—pull! As the blood rushed to his head he saw something dangling from him. He seized it in his left hand, and realized then that he had been pulling his necktie. One, two, three—*wrench!*

A cloud of white silk appeared all around him; the next instant his headlong fall slowed to a glide with a jerk that seemed to separate every bone in his body. He looked up at the silken dome puffed out to bursting point, down at the wilderness taking its time to receive him. He breathed a deep sigh of relief—and suddenly felt that it would be nice to float down, down, down in a parachute for ever and ever.

In the far distance he saw two aerial creatures like himself. They were floating together, so close that they almost touched. A long way away the royal plane dived to earth all afire like a comet. All three felt a pang as they heard the terrific explosion with which it greeted its last testing-place.

King Purple was thinking hard. He had plenty of time to do so before his feet touched the ground, for the plane had been flying at a great height. He was thinking: this isn't really happening. This isn't really King Purple of Patria, tied up in leather straps like a horse. There hasn't really been an accident. In fact, I wasn't really in the royal plane at all. I'm really in bed and asleep, he was thinking, and having one of those silly dreams which couldn't be true in real life. . . .

Or is it true? persisted another thought. His heart missed a beat, and he had to speak out loud to convince

himself. 'My dear Purple, you've been fretting too much. You must tell the physician to overhaul you. Do it at once, do it straight away. Do it as soon as you get back to earth.'

Back to earth? echoed his thoughts: then I *am* in the air after all. The parachute cords felt very real in his grasp—so, alas, would the tree-studded thicket which seemed to be taking aim at him. In a moment or two he would be in the heart of it.

He took one more look around the sky, and had just time to notice that the pilot and his friend had floated out of sight, before branches and twigs scraped and pulled him all over and he was hanging high from a tall tree.

In another part of the wilderness the pilot and his friend came to earth close together. The pilot landed first, which gave him time to disentangle his parachute and feel himself over for bruises before running to help his friend. Then they stood up and shook hands as heartily as if this was their first meeting for years.

'If you ask me, old comrade,' the pilot's friend said, 'I should call this a pretty awkward situation.'

'Very awkward, old chap,' said the pilot.

'You know, I sort of miss the old bus. She was slow and sort of too solid, I mean, but—well, I'd sort of got to like her.'

The pilot nodded. 'I know just how you feel, old fellow. When I think of the millions of hours I've spent banging her about the sky, I mean—well—'

The pilot's friend nodded. 'You do get sort of attached, I mean. But what I can't make out is how did it happen?'

'If you ask me, old lad,' said the pilot, 'I should say we shall never know. But it could be that the fuel tank—'

'Yes, it could be. On the other hand, I should say—'

They argued very technically for some time, until they had put forward every possible reason for the accident. Then the pilot remembered another thing.

'There's also another thing, old friend. I mean, here we are chattering and dickering in the wilderness, whilst we should be sort of getting busy.'

'H. unfortunate M., you mean? I agree, old amico, but where do we start?'

They gazed slowly about them, seeing nothing but the Forest of Goosejaw all ways. It stretched as far as everywhere, except where a distant patch of woodland or shrubbery blocked its progress.

'I know what you're thinking this moment, old familiar,' the pilot said suddenly. 'You're thinking that with only four eyes between the two of us it's like looking for a needle in a haystack. Am I right?'

'Not quite right, old playmate. Actually I was thinking about roast beef and a tankard of beer by its side. But I do see what you mean.'

'I'm glad, old chum. So the question is sort of what do we do now?'

'I think', said the pilot's friend, after a great deal of turning things over in his mind, 'that we set out as best we can for Gulch. It's a far sight nearer than anywhere in the old country, and if we keep walking we must meet a road somewhere; and where there's a road there's a car, and where there's a car there's a spare seat. Get me?'

'I get you, old bosom companion. Then in Gulch we must somehow get hold of His Nibs, who no doubt is keeping Our Majesty's dinner hot for him, and explain why King D. had better not wait any longer.'

'Then', the pilot's friend said, seeing the scheme as a whole, 'H.M. Decimal sends out a flying squad to comb

the wilderness, and in less time than you know they find poor old Purple, and live happily ever after.'

'And to aid them, old fellow-hiker, we spread out our parachutes on the ground—so.'

'And it's into the unknown we set off.'

King Purple discovered that if he wriggled in a certain way it gave the parachute harness a different place to bite into, and spread the discomfort more evenly. He was wriggling pretty often now, because it was like when you carry a heavy suitcase to the station: at first you change from the right hand to the left only once in a while, but at the end you are switching over every few steps. Not that, in his position, the king had ever carried a heavy suitcase to the station; but from this day, if ever such an occasion arose, he would say to himself: this hurts in the same way as hanging from a tree in a parachute.

The day was far advanced before the pilot and his friend found a rough track which led to a path which led to a hard road. They were footsore and sticky with perspiration, and they craved food almost as much as they craved water.

At length on the hard road they came to a cottage, and there after trying to explain what had happened to a deaf old lady who said she couldn't understand their funny dialect, they were given a glass of milk and a loaf of black bread. The old lady understood at the end that they were making for the capital, but all she could tell them was straight on, on, on down the road.

So the pilot and his friend thanked her politely for her food and her pains, and gave her some Patrian dilsnars which possibly she would never be in a position to spend.

Then they resumed their way, praying they might reach a main road before darkness fell.

Once again King Purple tried to guess the distance between his feet and the ground. If anything it looked more than ever: and yet what was worse—to drop down and risk a couple of broken legs, or to hang like this and die of starvation and exposure? The parachute looked to be so firmly lodged that he couldn't hope for it to fall of its own accord before the leaves fell in autumn.

But he was very, very afraid of unbuckling himself. And now that his voice had caught up a little he would try shouting again. Surely, *surely* there must be somebody about, even in this wild place. A shepherd, a gipsy, an outlaw—anyone!

He drew a deep breath and called 'Halooooo!'

The sound made him start, so that he had to summon up courage before he dared call again.

'Halooooo! Holla, ho, hey-hey, ho there, help!'

A stingy-looking insect that had been hovering inquisitively close to his face turned and darted away.

'Hoo, hoo, hoo! Help, help—*hic!*'

The last was an accident, the first of a series of hiccups that arrived in time to plague him still further.

'Drat!' the king said: '*Hic!*'

He held his breath for as long as it took a neighbouring cricket to chirp twenty times. Then he did it again, and again. The third time the cricket fell silent, and there was nothing to listen to but the rustling of leaves and the beating of his heart. King Purple gave a prodigiously wide yawn. He felt the kind of laziness that in any other conditions would have made him sneak off for a little nap. But, he reflected woozily, you couldn't possibly sleep

when you were suspended in mid-air like a spider. It was a wonder you could even yawn.

And yet, he thought, opening his eyes, if I close my eyes I do feel a sort of cosy contrast. He gazed around in case anyone was looking. High above he noticed a vulture or some other carrion-eating kind of bird cruising patiently round and round.

'Oh dear,' said King Purple uneasily; 'I wish I hadn't seen that!'

'A lift into Gulch?' asked the driver of the two-seater. 'With much pleasure. Hop in, both of you. You're foreigners, aren't you? Always glad to be polite to foreigners. Where d'you come from?'

'Patria,' said the pilot as he squeezed in on top of his friend.

'Patria, eh?' said the driver. 'Thought so, by your accent. Dare say you know the old saying we have in Prug, talking of a chap who speaks queerly or has some kind of impediment: "Can't understand him; speaks like a Patrian," we say. Still, I hardly look on you chaps as foreigners. Same language pretty well, lots of the same customs. Why, it even looks as if when your king—what's his name—Purple pops off, we'll be the same country. That'll be a big day for Prug. No news of your heir-apparent Florizel, I suppose? That was a funny business.'

It was with this kind of talk that the driver beguiled the journey to Gulch. Both the pilot and his friend wished he would stop talking—or better still that they had found a faster and more comfortable car. But cars had not been too frequent, and this was the first to have stopped in response to their waving.

The driver set them down at the airport just outside

Gulch. Here they could report the loss of the royal plane and of the king. The pilot sought out an official he knew fairly well, and the official bustled about with many-horsepower efficiency. Within five minutes of their arrival he was telephoning to the palace.

'Wait a minute,' the voice at the other end said; 'the king will want to hear this.'

The minute spun out into nine or ten before the receiver crackled again and King Decimal announced himself. 'Yes, Your Majesty; they're here in this very room. Yes, sire, of course I will,' said the airport official, and put down the telephone.

'Well, well, well,' he said to the pilot, 'it's you who are lucky lads. His Majesty is so disturbed about the whole business that he's sent for you right away. No, you don't have to go yet—he's sending his own car to fetch you.'

The pilot and his friend thought most highly of King Decimal when his second-best Daimler arrived to fetch them. It was gratifying to lean back in the richly upholstered seats and to be saluted by the airport guard. And at the palace the gates swung back as if by magic to allow the car to sweep through without interruption.

A most dignified courtier greeted the visitors. 'His Majesty wishes to see you as soon as you gentlemen arrive,' said he, and acutely aware of their travel-stained appearance the two were ushered into King Decimal's study.

The king's expression was one of deep mourning. 'Our poor cousin,' said he, after motioning the pilot and his friend to sit down, giving them cigarettes, and giving himself a cigar. 'Tell me all that there is to tell—the very worst.'

Between them the pilot and his friend described the

accident, while the king shook his head from time to time and asked an occasional question.

'The Forest of Goosejaw,' he said when the story was over. 'A difficult country to search in; you did quite right to come here first instead of attempting the search by your two selves. Well, rest assured that I'll have the Forest combed from end to end; my people shall not rest until King Purple is found, alive or'—he respectfully dropped his voice—'dead. And now, as you must be tired, I'll have you put up at the palace for the night, and tomorrow you shall be returned post-haste to Pelt, where I am sure your good queen will be most anxious to question you.'

And later, as they were ushered into their rooms: 'I say, old hero,' the pilot remarked. 'What a jolly hospitable chap the king is. I'd a sort of idea he was a sort of jolly tough egg, if you get me. Instead of which he's the heart and soul of kindness—you might almost say he is kindness itself.'

His opinion might well have changed had he seen at that moment the same king writing severe and secret orders to certain of his subjects. He was licking his lips as he wrote, and the look of mourning had given place to one of cunning and deep satisfaction.

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE EARLY morning King Purple awoke unrefreshed from a series of nightmares, so many that they could only crowd in by coming in twos and threes. He

was cold and numb, and the dews of morning had permeated his being so that he felt like a wet sponge. ‘Oh,’ he gasped out loud to keep himself company, ‘I am aweary, aweary! ’

Then he looked and discovered that he was not alone, for clustered below was a group of rude, shaggy peasants. They were of five different ages, and their upturned faces bore exactly the same awed look. The youngest of them, a young man with an old man’s face, had a pole with which he was trying to tickle the king’s feet. As soon as he saw that the king was awake he desisted.

Presently the oldest of them, a venerable old fellow indeed, stepped forward a pace and addressed the king.

‘Who art thou, stranger?’ he asked in a deep hairy sort of voice—‘Art thou man, or art thou saint or devil?’ He was very difficult to understand, the dialect of those parts being full of round sounds which were almost exactly alike.

‘Saint or devil?’ echoed the others.

‘Neither,’ answered King Purple indignantly, ‘I’m a king.’

The old man turned a bewildered face to his family—for such, it turned out later, they were. ‘What says the suspended one?’ asked he. ‘He says’, answered his wife, ‘he is a king.’

The patriarch looked up doubtfully. ‘There is no king but one,’ he said, ‘Abbastanzo.’

Here the young man took a part. Having in the past spent five months at school he was not without learning. ‘No, great-grandfather,’ he explained, ‘Abbastanzo is dead these many shearings. And his son Basto. And Basto’s son Antico. There is but one king, the son of Antico, the son of Abbastanzo’s son: King Decimal.’



The old man shook his head confusedly, but accepted the correction.

'Then hearken, thou man of the middle air, there is no king but one Decimal.'

'Oh dear, oh dear,' clucked King Purple to himself. Then slowly, so that it might sink in, and loudly, so that it might have some effect, he said: 'I am also a king. I am King Purple of Patria. Patria, not Prug.'

The patriarch turned to his family again. 'What says the pendulum who speaks in an outlandish tongue?'

'He says, great-grandfather, that he is king of another land, Patria.'

The old man's faced showed a brief spark of understanding. 'Patria, that lies over yonder, back of the Forest and of the forest that lies beyond the Forest? Then what doth he do here?'

'I know not, great-grandfather. Will you not question him?'

The old man nodded. He nodded for a long time while he sought words to frame the question. Then: 'What, thou inhabitant neither of earth nor sky, dost thou here away from thy people?'

'I crashed,' said King Purple.

'Crashed,' repeated the patriarch, not understanding: 'crashed, crashed, crashed.' He said the word over and over again as though it gave him pleasure. His old wife took it up: 'Crashed, crashed, crashed,' she mumbled through dry lips. 'Crashed, crashed,' said her daughter, who couldn't help joining in. In a moment they were echoing the word from mouth to mouth, and then they clapped their hands in time to it and stamped their feet.

King Purple drew a deep, deep breath which started from somewhere near the ground. He held it for a second, then: '*Hush!*' he roared.

It was such a breathful Hush that the peasants were stunned by it. They looked up curiously as though they had just seen the king for the first time.

'Now,' he said very slowly, in the sort of voice one puts on for not very bright children, 'kindly . . . help . . . me . . . down . . . from . . . this . . . tree.'

The youngest man was the first to understand what King Purple wanted. He explained it carefully to the others, pointing towards the tree and going through the motions of releasing the parachute. King Purple watched the light of understanding brighten their faces, like the early sunshine creeping across a row of furze bushes. Then the youngest man and the middle one shinned up the trunk like monkeys and proceeded to clamber among the branches.

They were remarkably agile when it came to using their hands. With a jack-knife apiece they slashed and hacked away, until the branches swayed with the effort and King Purple was bounced up and down like a dancing doll on a piece of elastic. Then he felt himself sliding and sliding, a bit at a time, and hoping and hoping the fall would be gentle. He could hear the parachute slipping, and sometimes a twig snapped and sometimes the fabric made a ripping sound. Then it yielded in real earnest and he slid to the ground with a steady motion, and at last he was on solid earth with the parachute falling all over him.

No sooner was he down than the women rushed forward to release him, and soon they too had produced pocket-knives and were eagerly cutting the parachute silk into shirts, handkerchiefs, etc.

King Purple stood up, staggered a few steps, and sat heavily down. From head to foot he was numb all over. With an effort he began to massage himself where the

stiffness hurt most. The peasants watched him for a time, until the old man gave an order to the others. Then all of them leapt on the king with the kindest intentions, and hammered and slapped him until he could no longer bear it.

'Stop, stop,' he begged; 'no more!'

The peasants hoisted him to his feet, tingling all over. They had certainly put a little life into him, though at a cruel cost. Now they were guiding him to an unknown destination, a silent procession with the old man in front and the women behind trailing the remains of the parachute.

'Where are you taking me?' asked the king.

The young man, who was supporting his left side, waved an arm in a general sort of way.

'Yonder,' said he, 'where our hearth is.'

The king saw nothing but a far-off clump of trees.

'I don't see any——' he began, then he shrugged his shoulders. What was the use? He must take things as they came.

The peasants seemed to be walking in no very certain direction, unless it were to the clump of trees, in which case they were making a long winding journey of it. With, at the best, only a sheep track to follow, the walking was scratchy and painful. At every step brambles and heather leaned over to snatch at the king's ankles, until he had scarcely a square inch of sock to protect him.

It took the best part of an hour to reach the clump of trees, where the eldest peasant paused in a reverent sort of way, flung out his arms, and said 'Home!'

King Purple saw nothing like a home until they penetrated the thicket. Then they burst into a small clearing where three rude huts were grouped round a

much-blackened open hearth. In the middle a cauldron steamed lazily over a slow fire.

Two children tended the cauldron, adding a bit of firing, tossing in a handful of early berries and dipping their hands in to take out the best titbits. 'Welcome, old grandfather,' they piped; then they saw the king and fled screaming into one of the huts.

For one awful moment the sight of the primitive settlement and of the cauldron made King Purple think of cannibals. To be sure, the old man did point at him and then into the pot, but he was inviting the king to take part in, and not be a part of, the feast.

'Look thou in the pot,' he said proudly. 'Soon, soon we make ourselves eat.'

King Purple peered over the rim into the greasy depths of a complicated stew. It simmered and churned itself over and over, and sometimes a piece of rabbit would come to the surface and sometimes a potato. There were other things too, he saw: a small bird or two, vegetables, a piece of paper, some twigs which probably weren't supposed to be there, and something which might be a rat but which he hoped (if it had to be one or the other) was a squirrel.

It wasn't a dish fit for a king, but the hot smell made his hunger tear and growl inside him. Presently the two children overcame their shyness and crept out of the hut bearing wooden bowls. These they distributed all round, and at a word from the old man they dipped them into the cauldron with no regard for rank or age. King Purple was left far behind, but plenty remained for him.

The peasants squatted on their haunches close to the fire and slopped up the stew, now drinking from the bowl, now picking out the solid bits with their fingers. King Purple copied them, only with rather more delicacy.

Squirrel or rat or whatever the strong-flavoured thing was, he did not hesitate to help himself a second and third time. It really was very fine stew.

One by one, as the peasants were full, they tossed aside their bowls and sank backwards. One by one they fell asleep. A nap seemed a good idea, King Purple thought. It was sunny and peaceful, and insects buzzed round him with the laziest of humming noises.

An hour later the humming changed to a drone, and King Purple awoke with a start. 'Hist!' he exclaimed, but the peasants were too busy snoring to hear him. No, he hadn't imagined it: there really was an aeroplane in the neighbourhood.

He nudged the youngest man. 'Listen,' he said.

The youngest man woke up. 'Come with me, quickly,' the king said.

With the youngest man stumbling sleepily beside him he hurried out of the thicket into the open plain. There it was: an aeroplane—two aeroplanes—flying low and as slowly as they dared. King Purple began to dance wildly about, waving his handkerchief. If only the pilots would see him! 'Hi, hi!' he shouted uselessly.

But the planes cruised ahead, sometimes weaving about as if searching the ground. King Purple's heart sank as they flew out of sight. The peasant stood by watching him with open mouth.

'Perhaps they have come for me. Understand?' the king said.

The peasant waggled his head in a way that could mean either 'yes' or 'no'.

Suddenly the king hurried back to the others with a brand-new idea in his head.

'Quick,' he said, 'bring the parachute!'

It took a long time to explain what he wanted, but eventually the pieces were collected and taken outside the thicket. 'Now,' King Purple said, 'stand aside.'

The peasants watched him lay out the silk in the form of the letter P.

'See?' he said. 'If they return they will read my mark from the air.'



The peasants looked up and down but couldn't see at all. They had been expecting the king to wrap himself up and sail away into the sky whence he had come.

'Now I shall stay here and wait.'

The peasants thought they would wait too, and they stood about like sheep while the king settled himself on a clump of grass inside the loop of the P. Then they grew

tired of waiting for the unknown, and drifted back to their huts.

It was evening before the king again heard the sound of an engine. The hope, which had flickered and nearly died, burned up again. There they were, coming back from the west, with the same slow deliberate flight. King Purple held his breath—surely they must see his sign.

Then one of the planes swooped towards him. Yes, yes, it had seen him. King Purple stood up and cheered as the rush of wind swooshed all round him. Then the pilot climbed rapidly into the sky, did a loop, and flew off in a hurry.

'Oh dear,' said the king.

He supposed he had expected it to land. He might have thought beforehand that on such rough ground it would not be possible. What next, then? He didn't know. He must linger with the peasants until a search-party arrived. How long would that take? It depended on where he was. It was no use asking the peasants; they would answer, 'Many sheep-driving days', or something equally impossible to translate. . . .

CHAPTER XIV

KING PURPLE SPENT the night on a bed of dried heather in the oldest peasant's hut. Never had there been a longer night, nor a scratchier bed, nor a more airless hut. He had too much to think about to let him sleep; then there had been the rich stew for dinner and supper; and there was the oldest peasant's thunderous snoring.

In the morning his eyes felt like marbles. A shave would have made a big difference, but it would be a waste of breath to ask for a razor. It was six o'clock.

At seven he crawled into the cool morning air. One of the women had revived the embers beneath the stewpot, and she was stirring the contents with an unpeeled stick. She nodded to the king and threw in several oddments from a basket.

At eight o'clock the peasants came tumbling out fully dressed (and since they slept fully dressed it took no time at all) with the food bowls all ready. Against his inclination the king took half a bowl of stew, just to keep up his strength. Already his ears were prepared to receive the slightest sound which might come from a search-party, although he hardly dared expect anything so soon.

After breakfast, according to regular habit, the peasants lay down to give a good start to the digestion of the stew. This time the king was too restless to do the same. Instead he ambled into the open, to stand guard beside the parachute on which the dew still glistened.

When the aeroplane did come, it came so soon that the king was unprepared. He had barely laid out a nest for himself in the heather before the far-off droning crept up on him. Then he saw a helicopter thrashing its way over. 'Oh, bravo,' whispered the king fervently, 'bravo!'

The helicopter began its descent like a wounded bird fluttering slowly to earth. It came down nearly vertically, hovered a while, and landed within a few yards of the king. Its propeller continued to rotate slowly, like a windmill pushed on to its back, and out stepped a pilot in the uniform of the Prug Air Force.

'King Purple?' the pilot said. 'Pleased to meet you. I'm from the king. Hop in.'

His manner was not such as he would have preferred,

but in the circumstances King Purple overlooked it. Now that help had arrived from so unexpected a quarter he was slightly flustered. Dramatic Rescue, he kept thinking, for no reason: Dramatic Rescue of King.

'Ready?' asked the pilot—impatiently, the king thought.

'Well, yes. Well, not quite. I must say good-bye to my hosts.'

'Make it quick, then,' the pilot said.

King Purple trotted back to the peasants who lay still in attitudes of sleep.

'I just came to say good-bye——'

The oldest peasant stirred and called up the rest.

'Sorry to disturb you, but I'm going, and——'

The peasants struggled to their feet.

'——and I wanted to thank you for your kind hospitality.

I——'

Here the king fumbled in his pockets, hoping to find a memento to leave with them. There was nothing he could spare but a piece of milk chocolate with only a small corner eaten. 'For you all,' he said, thrusting it into the nearest hand.

The recipient mumbled a word of thanks, sniffed at the chocolate, and tossed it into the stewpot.

'Well, er——' said the king, 'well——'

He gave a little bow and scurried back to the helicopter. The pilot ushered him in, hopped in himself, slammed the door, and took control. As the plane rose King Purple saw the peasants streaming forth to regard them with more than usual stupefaction.

A very good riddance, he thought; though well-meaning people. . . .

Now that he was away from the Forest his thoughts began to expand. What a curious—what an *utterly*

curious adventure! He wanted to tell somebody about it; but there was only the pilot, and the pilot didn't look as if he'd be interested. He was far too intent on his gadgets.

So the king began telling himself, pretending he was someone else.

'So there I was,' he whispered secretly, 'turning over and over in the air, falling, falling . . .' He relived every moment—'with a lot of wild-looking people glaring at me . . . cut down from the tree . . . a long walk . . . thoroughly unhealthy huts . . . sleepless night . . . a helicopter—I had never even sat in one before . . . on the way to Gulch.'

The king looked at his watch. 'How far are we away from Gulch?' he asked.

'Half an hour,' answered the pilot brusquely, 'at this speed.'

'Thank you,' said the king, and leaned back in his seat.

At the end of twenty minutes he began glancing at his watch. They were clear of the Forest of Goosejaw, for below he saw cultivated fields, tidy woodlands, and many villages. But there was no sign of a city.

'We should be near there by now, shouldn't we?' he ventured, when twenty minutes more had ticked through his watch.

'Where?' asked the pilot.

'Why, Gulch.'

'Gulch is over that way,' said the pilot, pointing away to the right.

'Then why——?' began the king.

'Who's flying this, you or me?'

The king didn't answer. No doubt the pilot knew what he was doing, in his uncivil way.

They were flying towards high hills. The country bore no resemblance to the outskirts of Gulch, as King Purple

remembered them. Then the pilot began to twiddle things, and the helicopter lost speed. It seemed to be wanting to land.

'But this isn't——' protested King Purple.

'Save your breath!' snapped the pilot.

The king craned his neck and looked down on a vast, lonely castle. Green parkland surrounded it, and he could see a moat filled with water, a drawbridge, a gatehouse, a narrow lane connecting it with the outside world. . . .

The helicopter fluttered down. Slowly and accurately it landed in the middle of the castle yard. The pilot said: 'Lovely landing.' He switched off the engine, opened the door, jumped out, and held up a helping hand to the king.

'Ups-a-daisy,' he said, 'this is it!'

Bewildered, King Purple stepped down. On every side solid walls reared above him. He swallowed and gasped. 'But——'

'But nothing!' the pilot said. 'Hey, Bluebeard!'

A plump, bald man had come out of a doorway. 'Don't call me that!' he snapped harshly. He stared hard at the king. 'Well, well, well,' said he, 'first the young colt, then the old horse. It's a small world.'

'O.K.,' said the pilot. 'The rest is yours.'

He climbed back into the plane, started it up, and waved cheerfully to the king. While the king still stood bewildered the helicopter trembled and started to climb. The king watched it go with an expression little more intelligent than the peasants'.

He realized that the bald man was talking to him.

'Welcome to Donjon Keep,' he was saying. 'We heard that you might be coming. No funny tricks, and you won't do too badly. Got a friend of yours here.'

'A friend?' repeated King Purple, hardly knowing what he said.

'Yes, a friend—well, I hope he is. Young chap. Follow me.'

The king followed: across the flagged pavement, up a chill staircase, through a damp passage. At the end an iron-studded oak door faced them. The bald man beat heavily on the door. Nobody answered. 'He's sulking,' he said.

From his belt he produced a bunch of keys. The lock rasped and creaked as he turned it. 'Open sesame!' he said brightly.

The king stood on the threshold of a huge stone chamber. It was furnished with plain but not uncomfortable things—tables, bookshelves, chairs, a bed.

Someone lay on the bed, someone lying in a flung-out, what's-the-use attitude. He looked up listlessly as the king entered. Then he leapt up and ran to him.

'Daddy, oh Daddy!' he said.

'Florizel, Florizel!'

They were still hugging and kissing and crying over each other when the gaoler left them.

There were so many questions to answer, so many stories to tell, that the king and the prince could not touch the food which came in an hour later.

'It's awful,' said Florizel. 'Uncle Decimal's promised to keep me here for ever and ever. It's worse than being dead, it's much worse than—'

'Your mother always thought, right to the end, that your uncle had kidnapped you.'

'So I said to the chauffeur, "Where are we going?" But he had a pistol with him.'

'A whole night, like a piece of washing hanging from a line.'



'And the gaoler behaves very smarmily, because I'm a prince, but I think he's terribly cruel at heart.'

'—or a conker hanging from a telegraph pole.'

'And he says orders is orders, and he's sorry but I must make the best of it.'

'Or even', said King Purple, 'like an ancient highwayman hanging in chains. Heaven forbid!' he shuddered.

'And never enough to eat.'

The king looked at his son closely. 'Yes, you are thinner,' he agreed. 'But you don't look any—'

He was going to say 'any the worse', for Florizel certainly looked healthier than he ever had. But perhaps that was not quite the thing to say.

'So now we're both here', said Florizel, on the verge of tears, 'for ever and ever. And nobody knows where we are, and soon they'll think we are dead, and Uncle Decimal will dig his claws into Patria and take over the throne—my throne, your throne: *our* throne!'

'Anything else?' asked the gaoler, sticking his head round the door.

'Go away, you beast!' Florizel snapped, stamping his foot.

'Yes,' the king muttered reflectively, feeling his chin. It needed a shave worse than ever.

To see Florizel again, to know that he still lived. He wanted to shout it from the castle walls, to tell Queen Madge, to tell the princesses, to tell all Patria . . .

But he could shout and shout: nobody would hear except Florizel and the grasshoppers which made the only living sounds in the stillness outside. . . .

CHAPTER XV

Two months had passed since the day King Purple's pilot and the pilot's friend returned from Prug with the cheerful news that there was nothing to worry about: King Decimal would attend to everything. But King Decimal's attention brought no consolation to Patria, which for two months had been without a king and without an heir. Daily at first Queen Madge telephoned her royal cousin-in-law, always to receive the same answer: 'No, no news at all.' In the beginning King Decimal himself answered Queen Madge; later he left it to one of his secretaries.

'Tell Her Majesty', he said, 'not to trouble to call so constantly. I have repeatedly promised to tell her as soon as I have something to tell.'

In spite of which Queen Madge persisted in badgering King Decimal, until even she began to lose hope. Then she cut down her calls to every other day; then twice a week; and then she left off altogether.

It was a solemn and shaky period in Patria's history. You could read it in the faces of the people, in the way they walked, in the way they were working less hard than usual. They were waiting for something to happen: for a sign from the government, an order from the palace.

In the absence of both king and heir the court carried on as best it could. The queen signed the state papers in His Majesty's absence, while the rest made shift as though he were still at the helm. But government went on uneasily, no more than free-wheeling.

Some there were among the people who believed that the king and the prince were dead. Others believed that

they still lived, their argument being that Royal Personages had never just vanished in all history: there was always a body to bury. But one and all wondered uneasily: *what was going to happen next?* Because, sure as fate, King Decimal would have something to say soon.

'King Decimal of Patria?—never!' declared the majority. A few shrugged their shoulders saying: 'What of it? One king's as bad as another. Out with the lot of 'em!'—but they were so few that their grumblings didn't count.

King Decimal acted discreetly. He could, one supposes, have cabled to Pelt: 'Dust down the throne. Arriving on Tuesday,' or something like that. Instead he took plenty of time. He waited until Queen Madge had ceased to telephone him, and one evening he took it upon himself to telephone her.

'Oh, Madge,' he began in a buttery voice, 'we have been talking again, Livia and I—with the deepest sympathy, believe me—about your unfortunate . . . bereavement.'

'Bereavement?' replied Queen Madge in a whisper.

'Your double bereavement,' continued the king, speaking faster. 'We were wondering what plans you had made for a suitable memorial service—'

'Memorial service?'

'—as befits the loss of so fine a pair as Purple and Florizel. Livia and I are most anxious to know, because we plan to announce a national day of mourning throughout Prug in their memory—'

'Their memory?' repeated the queen.

'—and we must, of course, know the date.'

Queen Madge took a firm hold upon herself. 'There is no date,' she said rather wildly: 'there is no memorial

service. And how dare you assume they are dead? Give me proof, even if it's only a lock of hair or a ring.'

'Now, now, Madge,' answered King Decimal firmly, 'don't get angry!'

'Angry? I've every cause to be angry. *I* know your ways, Decimal—I know how you're gloating; I can see your face as clearly as if it were gloating in this very room!'

She was heaving with indignation and longing for a good cooling cry. Even with hundreds of miles of only wire between them King Decimal could hear her fighting for breath. He hadn't, up to that moment, been gloating; but now his face contorted villainously and he could no longer help himself.

'Very good, Madge,' he said, 'we shall see, we shall see!'

That was the end of their conversation. And now Queen Madge burst into the tears she had saved up so bravely for so long. She sank into a chair as she groped for a handkerchief, while the boudoir echoed and re-echoed her sobs. She cried first in anger, with high-pitched sobs that escaped *eee!* between her clenched teeth. Then they gave place to pity and sorrow—great round throaty sobs. Then the sound died away and the tears flowed quite quietly and steadily. Every now and then she would draw a long shuddering breath, until her breathing grew normal and her eyes less moist.

There, that was better! Queen Madge made a few more dabs at her eyes and blinked away the sticky feeling. Slowly she stood up and stretched herself. She felt stronger now. She seized the silken bell-cord and pulled it heartily. 'Tell Leo to come here,' she said to the lady-in-waiting who came in response; 'I need some amusement.'

At the end of the second month all Patria knew that King Decimal was laying claim to the throne. He was still fairly gracious about it, although a distinct firmness had entered into his despatches to Patria. Patrian officials responded by playing for time. All the chief legal brains were at work to devise means to check King Decimal's progress. You cannot assume that a man is dead without proof (so ran their argument) or without allowing a reasonable time to elapse. To the question: 'But what is a reasonable time?' they had not decided upon an answer; nor were they in any hurry to do so.

'Of course,' said King Decimal casually, to somebody who would be sure to repeat it, 'where persuasion does not prevail, there is always force to fall back on.'

Patria heard and trembled. Patria knew full well the strength of King Decimal's armies and the weakness of their own. One blast of the trumpet and Patria would retreat before the invader. Two blasts, and Patria would be conquered. It could not be. . . .

But there were those to whom an invasion would have come as no surprise. Some were even spoiling for a fight. Here and there on the walls of Pelt appeared posters: 'No Foreign Kings', 'Long Live King Purple' and 'Patria Wants No Decimal System'. At all the important street corners small bands of conspirators gathered. They waved banners and flags and wore things in their buttonholes. They might have been up to no harm, or they might have been up to no good. A few of the newspapers shrieked warnings of: 'Patria, arm—before it is too late!' In front of the palace a beggarman let off a pistol and had to be arrested. For several days a black car cruised all around the town with a sign painted on the back: **FORCE MUST BE MET BY FORCE. DRIVE SLOWLY.** After a night of heavy thunderstorms an old fortune-teller reported that she

had seen an owl quaking and gibbering on the railings of the palace courtyard. 'Desolation,' she prophesied, 'it means desolation and death!' And many folk marvelled at her words.

These people, however, were the sort that would go to extremes anyway—if not to one extreme, then to another. You could not regard them as typical of the average Patrian. The average Patrian kept his voice low and hushed, occasionally venturing on some such remark as: 'Oo, isn't it awful?' He was full of doubts and fears, even as the general situation was full of suspense. He had one big hope left: he hoped for a miracle.

For two weary months Leo had lived in almost complete idleness. Never in his life had he found so little to do. More than once he thought of resigning to seek somewhere else the honest living he needed. But as long as there seemed a chance of the king's being found, he considered it loyal to remain.

So from day to day he shared the doubts, and the hopes, and the further doubts of the court. The gloom which filled the palace grew blacker and thicker, and there was no longer any laughter. Conversations became shorter and shorter because there was nothing interesting to talk about. People grew tired of company and sought to keep out of each other's way. You could feel the depression flowing out of the palace in waves. You could see it reflected in every palace official. Even the sentries, the farthest removed from the palace centre, had a hang-dog appearance, and saluted with twice the clattering they need.

It is hard to say exactly when Leo first thought of his plan: it may have been turning over and over in his

mind, waiting its turn to be noticed, for weeks. And although the king's pilot was partly responsible for urging Leo to act upon his plan, only a little of the credit is due to him. At most it was owing to a chance conversation the two had in private.

They met in the courtyard, and the king's pilot waved a cigarette at Leo and said, 'Have you a match?' Leo had, and he struck it and held it near the pilot's face, and the pilot said: '(Puff) Thank you. (Puff, puff) That's it. (Puff) Thanks.'

'Not at all,' Leo answered; then, 'Weren't you the one who had the accident with the king?'

The pilot looked shamefaced, and nodded. 'I was,' he said, 'though it wasn't my fault, I mean. Dash it, it could have happened to anyone—if they could sort of fly, that is.'

Leo nodded too, sympathetically. 'Do you think the king is dead?' he asked.

The pilot shrugged. 'I didn't at first,' he confessed, 'then I sort of did; then I didn't; then I did. And now—well, I don't know what to think.'

They were strolling towards the sentry-boxes. 'Tell me exactly what did happen,' Leo said; 'if you don't mind, that is. I've heard so many different stories.'

The pilot didn't mind, and by the time they reached the gates he had barely begun; so they made a half-turn and strolled round and round within the courtyard.

'And you're sure,' Leo said, as they turned for the third time and made the sentry itch to know what they were talking about so earnestly: 'You're sure you saw the king's parachute open?'

'Absolutely. I mean, you couldn't make a mistake over a thing like that. Even if you could, my friend saw it too.'

'And what sort of a place is this Forest of Goosejaw?'

'Awful place. If you can imagine the endless sky with heather and scrubby stuff growing out of it, well, that's Goosejaw.'

'So the king could still be alive but hopelessly lost.'

'The jolly old king', agreed the pilot, 'or jolly old anyone.'

That night when Leo put off his motley he folded it carefully and stored it at the back of his bottom drawer. Before going to bed he started to write a long letter, addressed first to the queen, then to the queen and princesses. After the second page he thought better of it. 'I am going to look for the king and Prince Florizel. I am sure they are both alive in Prug.' No, his mission had better remain a secret. He tore up the letter and went to bed.

In the morning he rose early, dressed in his oldest clothes, and collected a few possessions. He had, he found, very little money—but no doubt he could earn enough to keep him alive. He could sing for his supper, he thought, as he took down his guitar. There was a piece of plain paper on his table, and a pencil beside it. 'TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN,' he wrote. 'I am going away for a while, but will be back. Don't worry.—LEO.' He left the note where it lay, and crept downstairs.

He slipped out of the back gates into the cold autumn-feeling half-light. He had no very certain ideas of what he would do, beyond getting to Prug in the cheapest and easiest way. That meant the main trunk road, for there he could beg for a lift in a passing car or lorry. How he would get across the frontier he didn't know; but that was a question to solve in its own time.

There were very few people about: milkmen, road-sweepers, postmen and one or two others. In the main

street he turned to look at the palace. Then he wished he hadn't because of a sudden desire to go back and forget about this foolish quest of his. He knew at that moment how much he had enjoyed his life there, up to the time Prince Florizel disappeared. It was a strange life certainly, but when you grew used to the people and the customs of the court you couldn't help liking it. I shall go back, Leo thought, king or no king, even if it's only to say good-bye to them. But I'll find the king somehow, and Florizel—I will, I *will!*

He put on a spurt which lasted as far as the old city wall, where the suburbs began. There he looked back once more at the city of Pelt, and saw on the far side the morning sun catching up on him. 'What a lovely day,' he said, and felt better than he had for days.

In another ten minutes he reached the trunk road which had come the long way round, avoiding the city. After curving three times it ran straight as a ruler to eastward. It ran straight as far as the eye could see, and when he reached that far, Leo knew, it did the same again—and again and again, endlessly. And somewhere beyond *that* was Prug.

A motor-coach rolled by, 'Pelt-Gulch Express' on its side. If I had the money, thought Leo enviously, *and* the passport, I could be in that. Already it was far down the road, its passengers counting the journey in hours. Whereas I, Leo thought, may be days.

He jumped to one side to avoid a great lorry which carried a cargo of unhappy-looking cattle. That too disappeared in a flash, leaving the road entirely to himself. He walked in the middle, listening all the time for the sound of the next vehicle going his way.

The next was an open car, driven by a young man who looked frozen. He hooted at Leo and Leo turned and

waved his arm. But the young man drove by pretending not to notice. Two more cars came towards Pelt with kind-looking drivers, but that was no good. Then a lorry chugged up from behind him, and a motor-cyclist, and a couple of two-seaters. None of them stopped, but between them they showed that the traffic was on the increase.

The lorry that eventually pulled up did so of its own accord. 'Got a spare seat, if that's what you want,' said the driver. He was rather oily, but his face which was partly made up with smudges of axle-grease looked as chubby and kindly as a jolly miller's. 'Going to Gulch,' he explained; 'cargo of sacks.'

'To Gulch—all the way?' Leo asked, grinning with pleasure at his good fortune.

'All the way, yes. There and back, there and back, like a shuttle. How far are you going?'

'Well, not quite all the way. But I do want to get into Prug.'

'Goody!' said the driver. 'I'm a chap who likes company without chopping and changing his passengers too often. Comfy? Put your bundle down here, and keep an eye on the door. It likes to fly open when your back's turned.'

Leo made himself comfortable in the spare seat and settled down for the long drive. Beginner's luck, that's what it is, he thought.

'Staying in Prug?' asked the driver.

'Just for a time,' Leo answered. He hoped the driver would not question him too closely. In any case he must have some story ready. 'I'm going on a walking tour,' he went on.

'Walking tour, eh? Bit late in the year, but all right if the weather holds. Still, weather or not, it's a change to get out of the city for a while. You live in Pelt?'

'Yes, I'm the king's—I'm a student,' said Leo.

'Oh, one of those brainy chaps. Couldn't ever call myself that. I can read and write, but that's about all. Don't scarcely need that, for this job. Common carrier, that's what I'm called. Long-distance work, any sort of merchandise: rope, fertilizers, seeds, machinery, toys—today it's sacks.'

The morning passed pleasantly in the driver's company. At midday they stopped at a wayside inn for a bottle of wine and some cold pie. They were full of well-being when they mounted the lorry again. In a little while Leo felt sleepy; the hum of the engine, the heat and the fumes in the driver's cabin, and the drone of his companion's voice were all around him. Presently he could not resist the temptation . . .

'That was a good long snooze,' he heard the driver saying. 'Wish I could go off as sound.'

'I'm so sorry,' answered Leo, rubbing his eyes; 'how rude of me. Where are we?'

'Half an hour from the frontier,' the driver said.

'Oh,' answered Leo. Now that the moment had nearly arrived he was uncertain what he should do. 'Look,' he said, after thinking it over, 'I think you had better drop me before we get there. You see—well, I haven't a passport.'

'You haven't, eh? That's a bit awkward. They're sometimes a bit sticky on the other side—smuggling, you know. They're pretty hot on that, the customs fellows. Always ask if you've anything to declare; after every penny of duty they can get. The Patrian customs, now, they're different. Often forget to ask you at all.'

'Oh,' said Leo again. Then: 'Could anyone get by without a passport?'

'Might do, by creeping on all fours after dark. Why,

you're not trying to smuggle anything, are you? Don't mind my asking; I'm not trying to be inquisitive.'

'No, no; it's not that. It's just that—well, I badly want to get into Prug for a special reason, and I only decided last night.'

'Good enough,' said the driver agreeably; 'leave everything to me.'

A little later he came to a standstill. 'Hop in the back,' he said, 'we'll bury you under the sacks.'

It took a good ten minutes to make a cavern for Leo to hide in and replace the sacks over him in a way that looked natural. It took another ten minutes, of stuffy discomfort, to reach the frontier. Leo could see nothing; he only heard noises. There was the good-natured voice of the Patrian frontier guard, the driver's voice equally cheerfully replying, and the creak of a barrier opening to let them pass.

They bumped over a bridge and stopped again. Now there were other voices, speaking in a mixture of the Prug and the Patrian dialects. Leo could imagine the driver showing his papers; then he heard somebody walking round the lorry. He kept extra still.

'Anything to declare?' asked a voice.

'Yes,' the driver said. 'I declare you're the handsomest customs official I ever saw in my life.'

'Oh, go on with you!'

'May I?' the driver said. 'Thanks.'

The lorry jerked forward before there was time to say anything more, and for the first time in his life Leo was in a foreign country.

Soon the lorry pulled in to the roadside and the driver jumped down to unbury him.

'Here we are,' he said, 'Prug.'

The country looked no different from Patria, although

Leo had half-expected to notice an immediate change. He dusted himself down and resumed his seat in the driver's cabin.

'That was cleverly done,' he said.

'Yes?' remarked the driver, rather pleased with himself. 'Well, it depends how you treat 'em. They know me by now, most of them; though sometimes you get a new one.'

'I'm sorry I had to put you to trouble.'

'That was no trouble. Let me know when you want to get off.'

Leo wished he knew that himself. Prug seemed so huge now he was inside it.

'Somewhere in the Forest of Goosejaw, if that's convenient.'

'Goosejaw, eh? That's an odd place to want to go to. It's like saying: "Set me down in the ocean".'

Oh dear, Leo thought, feeling small and hopeless.

'Easy place to get lost in,' the driver went on, 'unless you're born in it. Why, look what happened to the late king. Jumped out of a plane, never seen again.'

'The late king?'

'Why yes, what else? Everybody's written *him* off. You should hear what they say in Prug. Sad for him, they say, but a gift for Decimal. He's only biding his time a bit longer, to make it seem respectable-like, and then in he'll go, slap into Pelt, to claim the crown.'

Leo's heart sank. 'Do you think he's dead?' he asked.

'Reckon so, else he'd have showed up by now. Unless', he added, 'he's hiding because he wanted to chuck up everything. Such things do happen; some of these kings get fair sick of their job, they tell me.'

Leo began to feel a flutter of excitement. 'You've not heard anything like that in Prug, have you?' he asked.

'Nothing you could put a name to, if you understand my meaning. But I lately heard a tale, in an inn that lies on this road, that a stranger appeared all of a sudden in the forest and was looked after by some peasant folk. I dare say the tale started from them. Well, as someone else said, it *could* be King Purple; you never could tell.'

'What happened to him?'

'I don't know,' said the driver. 'I just sort of half-heard 'em discussing it.'

'Which inn was it?'

'About half an hour on from here. It lies just on the edge of the Forest. Reckon I wouldn't mind stopping there now for a bite.'

The inn was set alongside a lonely stretch of the road. There were no other guests there, but it was hardly the place to expect a crowd. The innkeeper was sitting before a wood fire, nodding over a tankard of beer. He did not look very bright, and when he moved he moved slowly. But he was agreeable enough. Yes, his wife would prepare them some supper; meanwhile would they care to warm themselves?

The innkeeper's wife came in later. She looked no more bright than her husband, but she was a kind soul. She spoke to them about little things as she laid the table: had they come far? From Pelt—they were foreigners, then? No, she'd not been to Patria, but once when she was a girl she travelled all the way to Gulch and back.

And this was the place where Leo hoped to gain some clue about King Purple. It was not a promising sort of beginning, but he could think of no better one. During supper he told his companion that the inn so appealed to him that he proposed to start his walking tour from there. The driver said, 'Can't say I'd choose it,' but made no more comment.

When the innkeeper's wife came in to clear up Leo asked if she could put him up for the night. Well, she said, yes, she thought she could. She had a couple of rooms to spare, small but comfortable.



'Good,' Leo said, and soon after the driver thought it was time to leave. As a last act of kindness he exchanged Leo's money for Prug currency. They shook hands on the threshold, and Leo thanked him for his goodness. Then the lorry started up and left him alone at the inn.

CHAPTER XVI

LATER IN THE evening, when the lamps were lit and a good fire was burning, Leo sat in the parlour with the innkeeper and his wife and two peasants who dropped in for some ale and company. They had asked him to give them a tune, and he had played and sung himself into their confidence. They were slow to talk, perhaps because he was a stranger; but after he had made them laugh several times they raised their voices above the earlier whispers.

For a while Leo did most of the listening, then he tried to bring the conversation round to the tale the driver had heard. It proved a hard topic to introduce. He spoke about travellers: did they see many travellers thereabouts?—about royalty: had King Decimal passed that way on his return from the state visit to Patria?—about flying: had they heard of the accident to the Royal plane of Patria?

Often he thought he was on the right track, but each time the talk changed to something else. Leo began to despair. Short of saying ‘I’m looking for King Purple; have you any idea of where he might be?’ it seemed unlikely that he would learn anything.

Then unexpectedly he heard what he wanted. The landlord put a log on the fire while the others watched him in silence, and when he returned to his seat he said: ‘Talking of bogymen and spirits, they do say a man appeared in a tree deep in the forest, some two months back. They say a family of Forest dwellers took him in: All white, he was, like as if covered in silk. Then the next day he flew away from them.’

'Oh,' Leo said, 'where was that?'

'Somewhere north of here. Mind you, I don't say it's true, but I had it from one who had it from another, who had it from the folks themselves, so he relates.'

'Ah, that's right,' said one of the guests; 'and, talking of spirits, I am minded to tell you——' He started a long story which led them away from the innkeeper's subject. And there was no chance to hear any more, for the company became restless and ready for bed.

Later on, though, when the innkeeper's wife lighted Leo to his room, he asked her about the man who had told them about the stranger in the forest. What was his name; did he live near; was Leo likely to find him at home?

'You're a mortally curious young man!' answered she. But she told Leo what he wanted.

And in the morning she made up a large lunch to take with him. She would accept nothing for food or lodging, 'For you sang for your supper so sweetly,' she said.

From the inn Leo struck northwards into the vastness of Goosejaw. Here on the outskirts it was rather less desolate—there were rough paths to follow and an occasional cottage. He obeyed very closely his directions —make straight for the pond, follow the path by the big boulder, over the slope, and down below you will see a stone cottage. Everything was as the innkeeper's wife described, although the walk took longer than the two hours she estimated.

In front of the cottage door an old man sat sunning himself. He looked up with a start when Leo addressed him.

'Please, sir, are you Old Kaspar?'

'What of it, what is it to thee?'

'I heard of you at the inn,' Leo said, 'and I came here to ask something.'

'Ask something? What couldst thou ask that Old Kaspar should know? Thou'rt young, and I be but an old fool. Ay, that's what I be, an old fool!' He chuckled delightedly.

'Oh, come now, I'm sure you're not.'

'What dost thou know about it?' demanded the old man fiercely. 'If so be I choose to be an old fool, who art thou to deny it me?'

It took several minutes to pacify Old Kaspar, and many more to explain his errand. But at length, by the longest way possible, he told Leo about the stranger in the forest.

'No, 'twasn't I saw him,' Old Kaspar repeated. "Twas no more than a tale I heard tell. 'Twas my neighbour as told me.'

'Do you think I could see him?' asked Leo.

'Why, if thou hast eyes thou couldst.'

'Where does your neighbour live?'

'Yonder,' Old Kaspar said.

'I don't see——' began Leo.

'Of course thou dost not. Can thine eyes peer round corners, or pierce through the hillsides? 'Tis many a step to my neighbour's dwelling.'

He went on to explain the route, which sounded long and arduous. And, indeed, it took half a day's walking to reach Old Kaspar's neighbour. And by that time Leo's feet were blistered and his legs stiff with fatigue. . . .

Day after day he penetrated deeper into the Forest, directed from one house to another. It was a seemingly endless quest, this search for the people who had actually seen the stranger. At one time he nearly abandoned the project as hopeless, for the people he met were so stupid,

so vague. But the fine weather held, and somehow he managed always to find food and a bed in one or other of the peasants' huts. And as long as his patience lasted he was not unhappy. His feet were becoming hardened with walking, the fresh air filled him with health, and it was agreeable to be alone for a change.

So his days shaped themselves into a routine of inquiry and pursuit. 'I have come from So-and-so,' he'd explain; 'they told me you knew of the stranger who came and then flew away. Did you see him?'

It was often harder than explaining things to small children, for the Forest dwellers were slow to think, slow to understand. But at length they would grasp matters. No, they would say, they had not seen the stranger. 'Yet we heard tell of him, sure enough.'

'From your neighbours yonder,' Leo would put in, knowing the probable answer.

'Ay, just so.'

'And where does your neighbour live?'

'Long ways from here. Thou must follow the deer-track to where it divides—'tis a tidy step. Onwards from thither thou canst see a tussock of witch-grass athwart a small hillock,' and so on.

And Leo would shoulder his pack and his guitar, and proceed as directed.

It was bound, he felt sure, to bring results sooner or later. He had but one fear: that he might lose himself. Habitations grew fewer and farther between. It needed sometimes the best part of a day to walk between one and another. Once, to be sure, darkness had overtaken him too soon and he had spent the night in the full open. It was a creepy experience which he hoped he need not repeat. Still, it was bound to bring results sooner or later. . . .

Then he came to the stupidest peasant of all, a solitary who lived in a hut made of thick turves. Leo was a little afraid of him, for he had a way of baring his teeth when he talked. Also to a Patrian ear his language was even harder to follow than the rest had been.

Yet he was the most promising of all. It took him an



hour to express himself, but he for a fact had heard of the stranger at first hand. "Twas them outlaws as seed him. 'Twas them outlaws as told me,' he said.

Leo could never understand why he referred to them as outlaws, except that they lived even deeper into the Forest than the wild man.

"Thou'l not be wishing to see them, perchance?"

'Ay, I wilt,' Leo said, with a lapse into dialect.

"Tis strange," said the wild man, staring moodily ahead.

'Do they dwell extra far from here?'

'Ay, far and wide. Thou must follow the wolf-track until it doth fade away. Then thou roamest at random until thou dost see trees. There dwell the outlaws, and heaven guide thy sandals and bring thee to no harm.'

'Thank you,' Leo said. 'I suppose there aren't any wolves, are there? I mean, it's only *called* the wolf-track.'

'Nay, be not afeared. Not a wolf nor a cub have I seen, man or boy, since I knew the Forest. But if so be as thou meetest a wolf, thou must cross thy two thumbs, turn thrice on thy left heel, and say, "Wolf, do no harm, lest thou cause me alarm". 'Tis a spell I did learn from my granddame. Thou'l do well to bide by it.'

'I'm sure I will,' Leo agreed politely. 'I'll remember it.'

He went on his way along the heather-scarred track. It was long before the track petered out, and then he had to make his own way across to the hillock. On the summit he stared far ahead. Yes, there was a clump of trees, and another beyond it. He would make for the nearest and hope to be there by dusk.

It was an exciting feeling this: like reaching the end of the rainbow. He drew nearer and nearer until he could make out the separate trees. There was no sign of life about, but he had a strong feeling that there was his goal. Nearer still, and he noticed a wisp of smoke curling up from the tree-tops. He chuckled and walked faster. Now he was nearly there. . . .

Something white lay on the ground. He went over and picked it up. It was a torn piece of silk with a small piece of rope attached. Stamped round the edge was a pattern of small crowns. His heart jumped excitedly—a piece of

a parachute, a royal parachute, King Purple's parachute! It must be; it all fitted into the picture!

So King Purple *had* been there; perhaps he was there still. He hurried along the lane which led into the thicket.

In the middle was a clearing with huts and an open fire. A family stood round the fire gazing into the cauldron. There were three men, two women and two children. The children saw Leo first, and ran screaming into the nearest hut.

The rest turned towards him in wonder. They stared at him stupidly.

'Good evening,' said Leo.

The peasants looked inquiringly at each other.

'Good evening,' he said again.

'What does he say?' asked the oldest one.

'He says, "Good evening". Who art thou?' the youngest man asked.

'A visitor; my name is Leo.'

They continued to stare, until the old man whispered something. The youngest turned to Leo again.

'My grandfather asks, did you drop from the skies, like the other one?'

The other one—now there could be no doubt. These were the ones that could help him, though it would not be easy to win their confidence.

'No, I came from your neighbour back yonder.'

'Oh.'

The children had wriggled out of the hut and were edging their way towards Leo for a closer inspection. He kept very still, even when one dared to touch him. The other one was fascinated by Leo's guitar. She laid a tiny finger on it, and then touched a string. It went *plink!* and the child jerked her hand away. Then both children grabbed at the strings, and chortled with laughter.

'Like it?' Leo asked. He put down his bundle and played several chords, with his eye on the children. Then softly he sang them an old nursery rhyme, while they listened enraptured. The peasants gradually shuffled around him, intently absorbed in his singing. At the end of the song they stood as if spellbound, until the oldest peasant said: 'More.'

So he gave them a song with a simple chorus and made them understand that they were to join in. One by one they forgot their shyness, and one song followed another while the darkness grew deeper and the pot bubbled unattended.

By suppertime Leo had completely won them over. They had ceased to ask themselves who he was and what business he had there. All they asked was that he should sing and go on singing, for his music charmed their ears and made them think of things they did not know to exist.

It was no use, Leo saw, attempting to question them that night. They did not choose to talk; they were too anxious to listen. So might the beasts of the forest have listened to Pan when he charmed them with pipe music. (Had Leo known, his visit was to become another legend; soon all the Forest of Goosejaw would know of the traveller who came out of nowhere and conjured up beautiful visions.)

And at night Leo slept on the dry heather bed that had so tormented King Purple. Unlike the king he slept heartily, however, and was the last to turn out for the breakfast stew.

In the light of morning the peasants regarded him shyly, but they warmed in time to his cheerful manner. He left his guitar in the hut lest they expected him to sing again—which in fact they did. This morning, how-

ever, he would leave them. Since King Purple was no longer there he must press on without loss of time.

'Tell me,' he said, addressing the brightest of the peasants, 'tell me about the stranger who came from the skies.'

The peasants looked round furtively as if this were something to be spoken of cautiously.

'He appeared in a tall tree. We brought him here. He returned to the skies.'

'Is that all?' Leo asked. 'I mean, what was his name?'

'He called himself king,' mumbled the oldest peasant.

'He said, "Crashed",' put in one of the women.

'Ay, crashed, crashed, crashed,' broke in the rest.

Leo nodded. 'And how did he leave you?'

The first speaker looked round again nervously. 'He summoned aid from the skies. And a big machine dropped down, like an eagle, and carried him off.'

'An aeroplane?' Leo asked.

'Ay, it was and it wasn't. I have seen aeroplanes—noisy, angry creatures!—but this fluttered down like an ash-seed, all atwirl and atwist.'

'A helicopter,' Leo said.

The peasant looked blank.

'Which way did he leave you?' asked Leo.

At this all the peasants stood up and pointed to the trees behind them.

'Twas yonder,' said one of them, 'towards where the bright star lies. And he never returned.'

The bright star—that might be one of a thousand. Leo made as if to stroll into the open the way they had pointed.

'Will you show me beyond the trees?'

They led him outside the thicket and pointed their fingers again. Towards the north—the bright star: the pole star most probably....

That was all they could tell him. Now what should he do: head northwards on foot, in pursuit of an aeroplane which had over two months' start of him? Ridiculous chase! Leo gazed with despair at the blank wilderness ahead. A helicopter: one of King Decimal's, of course. Why did it fly north? That wasn't the way to Gulch or to Pelt. Where had they taken him? Why had nobody been told? First Florizel goes off in King Decimal's car, and is not heard of again. Then King Purple goes off in King Decimal's plane, and is not heard of again. . . .

I can't give up now, Leo thought. I must go north and question people on the way. And now it won't be 'Did you hear of the stranger who came out of the skies?' but 'Did you see a helicopter flying over here some time ago?' What a vague sort of question; what a vague sort of quest!

But at least, he thought, with a pleasurable feeling inside him—at least I feel pretty well sure that the king is alive.

CHAPTER XVII

BEFORE LEO WAS out of the Forest, rainy weather caught him up. It drenched his clothes and lowered his spirits. For hours on end he had the wilderness to himself as he battled northwards against the cold rain. It was a day's walk from the outlaws to the next dwelling, and nearly a day's walk to the next. In each place, however, Leo found lodging and a fire to dry him, and in each case he heard again of the helicopter's passing.

But it was a miserable time for him. Sometimes he

would talk to himself to forget the perpetual hiss of the rain. He would pretend he was two people, and indulge in a furious argument about anything that came to mind. Then he'd sing for a while at the top of his voice; but he couldn't keep it up for ever, and when he ceased the sound of the rain filled his ears.

Then his world suddenly changed for the better. Not only did the sun break out, but he found a hard road—a road with a real signpost on it. This must be the end of the Forest, he thought. He turned and looked back across the wilderness from which the sun sucked up layers of mist. His clothes, too, were steaming, and he could feel the dampness escaping from them.

He wanted to shout for joy, to express his delight in that lately he had been the most miserable creature on earth and now was the happiest.

'I'm so glad I came!' he exclaimed to a chaffinch which alighted for an instant on the signpost.

'Pink-pink,' said the chaffinch.

Leo drew a huge breath of warm, steamy air.

'Forward!' he shouted; and the chaffinch flew off in the opposite direction.

Northwards—he must keep going northwards. The first road that pointed northwards he would follow. He would stop at the first inn he came to, for it was getting late and he was tired. An inn—how delightful! Clean sheets, a real bed, hot water, a solid roof . . . and some time in the evening he would have to ask casually the same old questions: Did you by chance notice a helicopter flying over here not very long ago? Do you remember its direction? No, I've no particular reason to ask; just curiosity.

He found his inn just as the sun went down. They took him in, fed him and gave him the sort of bed he had

hoped for. They had seen the helicopter—some time in August, wasn't it? They remembered it because they'd never seen one before, only pictures. It was flying towards Mittelburg they thought. Mittelburg lay *that* way, to the



north. They knew it because the innkeeper's son had a beergarden there..

Leo left in the morning, and at night he put up in another inn. The roads now were growing in importance and in numbers, for he was in a richer country with farms and fields. The Forest of Goosejaw belonged to the past.

Whether he liked it or not, all the answers he got combined to direct him to Mittelburg. It lay right in the path of wherever he was bound for, and its name was on every signpost. Perhaps King Purple was there; perhaps that was the end of his quest. He wished it had been only a village, because in a village people were more likely to have noticed unusual things, like strangers and helicopters. Also, he told himself ruefully, towns were more expensive to live in, and he had very little money left.

In fact, by the time he reached Mittelburg he had scarcely any money at all. Enough for a night or two, that was all. He was distressed at the size of the town, and he did not care for the look of the people.

He found lodgings in a cheap hotel off the main street. There were plenty of other visitors, so that he missed the intimacy of the village inns. Nobody seemed inclined to talk to him; in fact they regarded him with some suspicion. When he looked at his weather-beaten clothes, he was not altogether surprised.

Leo's sojourn in Mittelburg was, he feared, to be the least rewarding phase of his quest. He did not know how to act—so many people and none he could confide in. Nobody he asked remembered seeing a helicopter in August: what an odd sort of question! He sat for hours in cafés, reading the newspapers for any word about Patrian affairs and listening to people's talk for a mention of King Purple.

Very soon he was penniless, and all but desperate. He wanted so much to be out of Mittelburg, yet something prompted him to stay. He *must* stay a while longer; 'Sooner or later', an inner voice told him, 'you will be rewarded.'

There was no other way but to start earning. To that end he stood in a side street and sang, assuming a beggarly

expression and smiling politely each time he was given a coin. He did not do at all badly, and truth to tell quite enjoyed himself. Sometimes people would stop and talk, asking how long he had been on the road and had he, poor chap, a family to support? Leo answered as untruthfully as he thought necessary, making in addition excuses for refusing two offers of work.

He moved to an even humbler hotel so that he could save a part of his earnings. It was a flyblown establishment with grimy walls and dusty furniture. In the hall were stained photographs of Mittelburg and a plan of the town showing its principal features.

Now it could be claimed that this plan was Leo's salvation, for it started him off on the track again. The first day he noticed it only in passing, thinking no more to pause and inspect it than to stop and admire the print of the town hall. The second day he would have done likewise, had he not stood aside for two people to pass. It was then that the device in the corner caught his eye and started him thinking: an unusually florid one showing how the town lay. A long arrow pointed out the north with a big N at the tip and a small S below.

A chambermaid gaped with surprise as she heard Leo bellow and saw him dash out without warning. He slammed out of the door and went hurrying towards the main street. Why didn't I think of it *earlier*, he was thinking; why *didn't* I think of it earlier? He paused at the crossroads while he tried to remember if the shop he sought lay to right or to left. Then he threaded his way through the leisurely shoppers and plunged into the stationer's.

'Have you a map of this part of the country?' he asked.

The stationer thought he had. Yes, there were two copies left. Should he wrap it? No bother, but if the

gentleman was in a hurry——. That would be two coronets, please.

Hugging the map to him as if it were his most valued possession, Leo raced back to the hotel and locked himself in his bedroom. He unfolded the map and spread it out on his bed. 'Mittelburg and District', it said, and included nearly all that part of the Forest of Goosejaw which he had traversed. Unfortunately it was little more than a bare yellow patch, with a touch of blue here and there signifying water and a spot of green signifying woods.

'That was the road I came on,' Leo said, 'and I stayed there, and there, and . . . *there*. Now if I take a straight line, the outlaws' place is about there—perhaps that green marks the very spot?—and the others aren't at all clear. But if I continue the line northwards, it misses Mittelburg by a fairly big margin, and . . .'

So the plane with the king in it had probably gone there and there. Where did that lead to? Nowhere very definite—right off the map, probably. A tiny village, and another farther on: a patch of forest, then a village by a lake. Then . . . then . . . another wilderness, it looked like.

Leo turned away from the map and stared at the ceiling. He was trying hard not to think again 'It's hopeless'.

'Supposing,' he said to the electric-light bulb in the middle of the ceiling, 'supposing I were a king—a bad king, and decided to capture my neighbour so I could have his throne. Supposing, I mean, I didn't want to murder him; what would I do? I would hide him, wouldn't I? You agree, don't you?' he asked the electric-light bulb.

'In that case,' he continued slowly, 'where would I hide him? Somewhere nobody would hear about him. Some-

where lonely, out of touch with the world. Agreed? Now *where* is somewhere lonely? Almost everywhere,' he answered himself, thinking of the Forest of Goosejaw. 'It happens, however'—here he wagged a solemn finger at the electric-light bulb—'that I know the king was flown away in a northerly direction. Of course, my dear bulb, you may say that he could easily have changed that direction. But you always were a bulb to look on the dark side of things; it's all that dust you've collected, most likely.'

He looked at the map again. A patch of forest, a village by a lake, then another waste of open country. He drew a straight line with his finger, right up to the margin. 'Hullo,' he exclaimed, 'what's this?'

On the very edge, so close that it only just managed to squeeze in, was a little black dot. Beside it, in old-fashioned printing, were the words 'Donjon Keep'. He referred to the explanatory notes. 'Castles, Abbeys and Other Antiquities shown in Gothic Lettering,' he read.

Leo lay back gradually while little electric shocks tickled him all over. 'So you see, bulb,' he said, trying to sound casual, 'I do sometimes think logically, don't I?'

Although a whole book—and a long one at that—could be written about the next part of Leo's journey, it would not be especially interesting. For nothing unusual befell him on the way. He knew now where he was going, and he was going there as fast as he could. For the most part, it is true, he walked; but sometimes a car would stop to take him up for a part of the way. And on one occasion he travelled in a cart drawn by oxen. That, however, saved merely his energy and not any time, for it lumbered as though time existed for no purpose.

At last he came into the village by the lake. There it

was, exactly where the map told him to expect it; and to the south he could see the far-distant patch of forest. The village stood as near to the lake as it could without getting its feet wet. Wasserwick, it was called, and it consisted of a few cottages and one inn. The inn had paintings all over the outside walls, and a balcony leaning over the lake. It was old, weather-beaten and rather dirty.

Much the same could be said of the innkeeper, Leo thought. He appeared from the cellar in answer to Leo's call.

'What', he said, 'do you want?' in a highly suspicious and quite uninnkeeperish sort of tone.

Leo answered, he wanted accommodation.

'Why, and if so for how long?'

Because, Leo said, he was walking for his health. As to how long, that depended.

'On what?' asked the innkeeper.

On how long it takes me to find what goes on in the castle, thought Leo. 'On how much I like it here,' he said.

'You won't like it much,' said the innkeeper harshly. 'We don't take to strangers—especially strangers with foreign accents.'

At that moment the innkeeper's wife shuffled up. 'Let him in,' she snapped at her husband, 'he's simple enough. He don't look like a snooper nor a mischief-brewer, nor won't ask no questions as is none of his business neither. Come in, young man; don't be put off by his fretful ways. It's only—well, we have to be careful round these parts.'

Leo only just stopped short of asking why. He must remember to avoid questions that were none of his business.

The innkeeper's wife took charge of Leo's goods and beckoned him upstairs. She walked like a duck, as she well might having lived all her life in and out of the

lake. 'This is it,' she said, showing him a good-sized bedroom. 'It's quiet, I'm afraid, but everything's quiet in Wasserwick—dead, you might call it. Shout if you want anything—the bell don't work.'

As soon as she closed the door Leo made for a framed photograph on the wall. 'Donjon Keep', it was titled, 'by moonlight.' It showed a foursquare castle enveloped in gloom, which was partly because of a feeble moon but largely because of old dust. On the opposite wall hung a text, and above the bed two framed mottoes: WALLS HAVE EARS, said the one, and the other: BELIEVE NOTHING YOU HEAR.

Now why——? Leo thought, but he didn't bother to finish it. He had learned to be patient thus far, and there was no need to continue otherwise.

Later on he went downstairs for supper. In the parlour there was a long table where his hostess had set a place next to the innkeeper. 'Everyone eats here together with us,' she explained; 'rich or poor—whether they're duke, tinker, tailor or spy.'

At the word 'spy' the innkeeper dropped a fork and shot her a furious glance.

'Psst!' he said with a quick glance at Leo, who kept looking innocently away.

The innkeeper slowly resumed cutting up the fish. 'Yours,' he said, pushing a plateful at Leo. 'The wife's. Mine. Bless this food and ourselves, and may our tongues not outrun our discretion. Amen.'

It was a silent meal, awkward for Leo because of the bad feeling sprung up between the innkeeper and his wife. She, Leo felt, would be glad of a gossip, while he—well, he would rather trust no one to talk.

Before they had finished a number of men drifted in for a smoke and a glass of wine. They all sat down at the

big table after a curious look at Leo and a raise of the eyebrows at the innkeeper, as who should ask 'Is he all right?' Among them were two in brown uniforms, bearing rifles which they stood against the wall near the door. They were Castle Guards, Leo learnt later.

A gathering of suspicious-minded people is exceptional if it does not thaw out a little. So it was that the folk in the inn parlour gradually forgave Leo for being a stranger. Wisely he had begun by holding his tongue, but when singing began he joined in and earned praise because he knew the words of so many songs. Then a man came in with an accordion and made them sing boisterously. And as if that weren't enough, the innkeeper's wife remembered seeing Leo's guitar.

'A guitar, eh?' the accordionist said. 'Fetch it, lad.'

Leo skipped upstairs and came down singing, 'The City of Gulch is the World's Fairest Town'—a tactful and tuneful choice, he felt; for everybody in Prug knows and believes it.

'Well rendered, lad!' cried the accordionist ungrudgingly. 'Who are you, and where d'you come from?'

Leo swallowed. 'I—I'm an orphan,' he answered, 'and I come—I don't really know where I come from.'

He noticed the innkeeper and one or two more closely watching him. It was an awkward silence.

'I mean,' he went on, 'I haven't a home. I——' he tapped his guitar—'this is my living. I've lived in—well, Gulch and Mittelburg and . . . and——' he racked his brains for the names of other places in Prug.

'In Gulch, eh?' said one of the Castle Guards; 'you don't talk like a Gulcher.'

'No, nor you do,' said the innkeeper; 'in fact, I was saying to the wife, you don't talk like a Prugman at all.'

'Don't I?' Leo replied. He had been trying so carefully

to speak the Prug dialect. ‘Ah, no,’ he added hurriedly; ‘you see, I wasn’t actually born in Prug. I was born in Freesia.’

‘Ah,’ the innkeeper’s wife said, on a note of relief, ‘so that explains it. My man says to me: “That’s a Patrian twang, that is.” “Well, what of it?” says I. “Nothing, nothing,” says he, “but thinking what we think, even if we don’t know, you can’t be too careful.”’

Leo uttered a hearty laugh. ‘Patria?—what a funny mistake! Though of course, being next to Freesia, the languages are something alike. But *Patria*—fancy thinking that!’

At which the whole company laughed—though mainly, Leo felt, as though relieved at something.

‘Anyway,’ he said brightly, ‘another song, somebody. What shall it be?’

When the party broke up one and all paused to bid Leo a friendly good night. The last to leave was a plump, bald man. ‘Thanks,’ he said; ‘lovely singing. Hope to hear you again if you’re not going just yet. I would like to invite you to my place, but—well, it’s not easy, what with this and that and my hands full at present and got to be careful. Anyhow, here’s hoping. My name’s Rolfe, but they all call me Curly—can’t think why.’

‘It’s a very hospitable thought at least,’ Leo replied, ‘and I would have been glad to accept. As it is, I quite understand.’

Understand nothing! he added to himself—but I will; if it takes me until I’m a hundred. . . .

The sound of car engines, of bicycle bells and the cracking of whips brought the village to life for a minute or two before Wasserwick settled down for another night.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE INNKEEPER CAME down late to breakfast his usual surly self. Not so his wife, who was full of bustle and chatter.

'That was a real jolly evening,' she declared, 'twas a pleasure to hear it.'

'Wasn't it?' agreed Leo. 'Such cheerful people. Who was the man with the bald head—Curly, they called him.'

'Don't tell him!' the innkeeper exclaimed gruffly.

'And why shouldn't I?' said she.

The two looked daggers at each other.

'I dare you,' the innkeeper said in an angry low voice.

'Very well. Curly lives at the castle. There, what's wrong in saying that?'

Leo hoped they would not start a quarrel. He was relieved when the innkeeper looked only disgusted, and took a deep draught of coffee. 'Oh, you women,' he exclaimed as he came up for breath, 'gossip, gossip, gossip!' He buried his nose in the mug again.

'Gossip?' echoed the innkeeper's wife shrilly; 'D'you call it gossip just to tell somebody that Curly lives in the castle? I didn't tell him anything else, did I? Did I say what he did there, or who he looks after, or why we don't talk about it? Answer me: did I?'

'Hold your tongue!' snapped the innkeeper. 'Don't mind her,' he said to Leo quietly. He looked as if something was on his mind. Then he half-shrugged his shoulders and went on: 'you see, Wasserwick's an awkward place to be in. You know of the castle maybe? Well, the castle—well, the castle's still in use, as you might say. Things go on there, things too important for us ordinary

folks to know. But where things go on like that there's bound to be rumours, if you get my meaning. And that's where we have to be careful. Funny things happen to folks as can't keep their mouths shut.'

'What sort of things?' Leo asked in a hushed voice.

'They disappear. There was Jan, now, the baker—as fine a baker as ever kneaded dough. Great chum of one of the Castle Guards. Learnt too much; talked too much—Pouf! Never heard of again. And the poor widow Applegood—'

'Ah, poor soul!' exclaimed the innkeeper's wife. 'As gentle a widow as ever was bereaved. Born in Wasserwick and lived all her life here. And one day she calls at the castle to deliver some goodies to Curly's wife. Quite by chance she sees something she shouldn't see. She keeps it to herself for a time, until she can't hold it no longer. So she tells her familiar, old Goody Nicklering, and presently it gets about. Then the soldiers came and took both the old bodies away.'

Leo shuddered slightly. 'Well,' he said, 'as a stranger this is no business of mine. All the same, I am glad to be told of it.'

'That's the right way to look at it,' replied the innkeeper. 'If you must stay in Wasserwick, keep yourself to yourself and away from the castle.'

It will readily be understood that when Leo set off for his day's walk he kept his destination a secret. 'A walk?' said the innkeeper. 'Well, if folk must walk for pleasure at this wholly unseasonable time of the year, I would advise a stroll round the lakeside.'

The innkeeper's wife wrapped some pasties and cheese in a napkin, and Leo departed for the whole day. He knew whereabouts the castle stood, but in case he was being watched he made a pretence of taking the inn-

keeper's advice. He kept to the lakeside path until he felt safely out of sight, before bearing away to northwards.

First it was farm land he walked through; then the ploughed fields tailed off and gave way to grass—neglected grassland where a horse or two grazed on the thin late herbage. The land rose and fell; not too steeply, but enough to limit the view.

Leo followed the hard lanes until they turned sharply or came to an end, when he would make a new way over the grass. Once he lost sight of the fields he was entirely alone. Not a person was in sight.

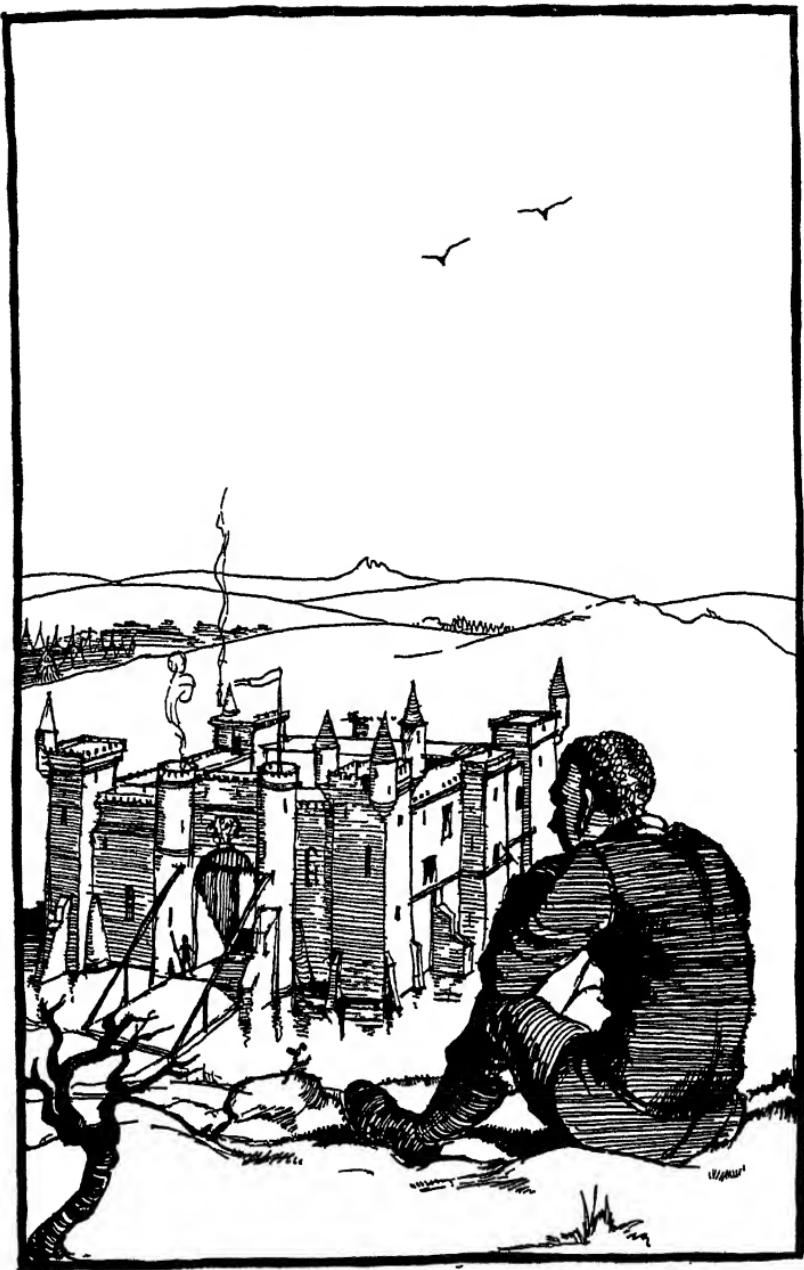
At a rough guess he knew how far the castle was from the village: he remembered that much from the map. The position of the wintry-looking sun told him more or less which way it lay. Wherever it seemed sensible he made for the higher ground where the longest view offered itself. As yet there was nothing to hinder his going where he would. . . .

Then he breasted the slope which gave him a view of the castle; and the castle was surrounded by parkland, and the parkland surrounded by a barbed wire fence.

'Oh!' said Leo, surprised.

This was not the very thing he wanted, for the fence looked stand-offish even from that distance, and there was a Castle Guard patrolling it. How he could approach nearer without being spotted, he couldn't begin to think. There was no cover outside the fence, although once inside—if he could once get inside—there were some useful-looking trees where a man could hide for a while.

In any case, he reflected, he must first make a tour of the park, to view the castle from all sides and learn how the land lay. That meant a long walk, for he must keep out of sight of the guards.



He retired a little way down the slope and using the higher ground to protect him he set his course parallel with the fence. Now and then he bobbed up on the horizon to ensure that he kept to his course. The fence, he discovered, was set roughly square, and a Castle Guard did sentry duty along each of the four sides.

Short of an armed gang to help him take the castle by storm, Leo could so far see no means of entering. Even had such a band miraculously appeared he would still hesitate, for there was no certainty that King Purple was held there; it was just a conjecture—and a hope.

It made indeed a long journey, his furtive survey of the castle. He saw no sign of life about it except a column of smoke from one of the corner towers and another from the tower on the left of the drawbridge. He lingered most over the distant view of the gatehouse, that being the only possible entrance and therefore (unless one swam across the moat) the only possible exit for visitors and escaping prisoners. A guard hovered near the gatehouse, from which the fence started and finished. Behind the gatehouse a wide path ran to the edge of the moat to meet the drawbridge.

This much Leo could see from his vantage point many a stone's throw away. It was not an encouraging prospect; for the present he confessed himself beaten.

He talked it over to himself as he returned to the inn having seen all he needed to see. 'Force is out of the question,' said he; 'you must use stealth; cunning and stealth.'

'My, my,' said the innkeeper's wife, "tis a long stroll you've had. We were thinking you'd lost yourself.'

Leo laughed with her. 'No, but I felt in no hurry and took my time. It's a beautiful lake, isn't it?'

In the evening he eagerly looked up as each footstep sounded outside the inn parlour. Most of yesterday's crowd were there, but of the two Castle Guards one was new. The other greeted Leo like an old friend. 'In good voice tonight?' he asked. The new guard eyed Leo doubtfully, then turned to the other with a lift of the eyebrows. 'He's all right,' Leo heard the other whisper; 'friendly young chap, quite harmless.'

The first glasses of wine were empty and the first pipes half-smoked before Leo's fervent wish came true and Curly appeared.

'Bit late tonight,' Curly said to the company; 'bicycle trouble. Who's here tonight? Evening all. Why, there's our young singer—how goes it, friend?'

'Very well, thank you,' said Leo, putting on his most engaging smile. He shifted along the bench, making it clear that he wanted Curly to sit by him.

The evening passed cheerily, just as before, with chaffing and singing. Never had Leo worked so hard to make a good impression; above all it was Curly whose friendship and confidence he wooed. When they called for particular songs he sang Curly's choice first; when Curly recited a tale or gave out his opinion on some matter Leo listened with exaggerated politeness; when Curly's pipe went out a match was all ready in Leo's hand. It sickened him to be doing it, but——

'Excellent fine entertainment, young chap!' burbled Curly when the time came to leave. 'Don't know when I've enjoyed myself so. You know,' he put a hand on Leo's arm and dropped his voice, 'it's a good thing for me to forget myself sometimes—get away from work, you understand? Mine's a hard job; you have to act cruelly sometimes, you understand?—and I'm not a cruel man, you see; no one kinder at heart, understand. And—well

—anyway, be glad to see you again, any time. So will my old lady be. You know what?' he went on, 'bless me, if you aren't the image of her son Hal by her first husband. Reckon she'll see the resemblance straight away. Bless me again if you couldn't have walked right straight out of his photograph!'

He shook Leo's hand heartily before turning away. He had taken perhaps just a little too much wine, for he stumbled in turning and a few seconds later Leo heard him trip over the door sill and tumble full length outside.

'A good evening's work,' Leo said to encourage himself just before he fell asleep.

For the next two days Leo kept away from the castle and haunted the village instead. He wanted to make himself known, to be accepted as a harmless ordinary visitor, and that in the shortest time. His first evening at the inn had given him a nodding acquaintance with one or two folk, the second a smiling one, and now they were ready to exchange greetings. Pretty much the same people frequented the inn every night, which was all to the good when it included such as Curly and the Castle Guards.

And now the first thing Curly did on entering was to look for Leo, and willingly Leo made a place for him. Had conditions been otherwise Leo might have developed a genuine friendship for the man; as they were he kept telling himself, *If I think right, this villain is my king's gaoler; and I—I'm a spy!* (It was a thrilling moment, the one when Leo decided that that's what *he* was, no matter what Curly might be.)

He felt very much like a spy on the afternoon he took his chance of getting into the castle. He left the inn after lunch as if to set out on his usual stroll, but for a change

he carried his guitar. He took the direct road, with no attempt at concealment until he came to the private road. But although he expected to see a guard posted there, the nearest was some way off alongside the wire fence. He'll see me without a doubt, the moment he turns, Leo thought; and his heart began to hammer uncomfortably. But he wouldn't do anything, would he?—he wouldn't shoot without giving me a chance to explain, surely. Leo hurried towards the gatehouse, never once looking towards the boundary guard. In spite of his eagerness his eyes took in every detail of the castle and its surroundings.

Nobody could have looked more innocent than Leo—a young man, little more than a young youth, in weather-worn clothes; a travelling musician by the look of him—as he walked boldly up to the gatehouse, ignoring the fearsome notices planted around.

He had one moment of fear as he heard the click of a rifle-bolt and a sharp challenge from the guard. Then the guard stepped forward, and Leo recognized him.

'Oh, it's you,' said the guard. 'I saw you down at the inn last night. What d'you want here?' He was pretty sharp about it.

This was Leo's first test. 'Curly asked me,' he answered, in a calm confident voice.

The guard hesitated, and began whistling tunelessly through his teeth.

'Really he did,' Leo went on. 'He *does* live here, doesn't he?'

The guard nodded. 'Yes, he lives here, but——'

Leo took a chance and pretended to go away. 'Look,' he said, 'I didn't realize there were difficulties. I mean, I'm quite strange here, and I don't want to cause any trouble. So if you're in doubt, or if it's beyond your powers to let me in, I'll go at once—really I will.' He was stammering

beautifully. 'I mean, I don't want to get you into any trouble. I'd hate to, after your friendliness at the inn——'

'All right, all right,' said the guard. 'There won't be any trouble. It's Curly's business, not mine. Through you go—"Pass, friend," as we say. The drawbridge is down and there's a bell on the other side.'

With profuse thanks Leo passed through the gateway. The drawbridge gave slightly at every step, and set up a creaking in each of the vast chains by which it was lowered or raised. On the other side was an arch with a portcullis set within grooves, ready to drop at a moment's notice and cut off the castle from outside. Under the arch was a doorway in each wall, with a bellrope beside the one on the left.

Leo pulled it, and the bell went *clank, clank—squeak!*

Curly himself answered it. 'Well, you are late——' he began, then: 'It's you, is it? I thought it was the milkman. I didn't know it was a stranger. To say the truth, I wasn't expecting guests. You see, it's awkward having guests here.' He kept the door half-closed while speaking.

Leo put on a crestfallen expression. 'Please forgive me if I'm not welcome,' he said; 'but you did say you'd like me to come and see you, honestly you did.'

'Did I?' Curly said. 'Oh, well. If the guard let you pass, it's all 'right. It's his business, not mine. And seeing as you've got this far, come you in. There'll be a spare cup of tea for you; the old lady is brewing one now.'

Leo followed the gaoler along a dark passage and into a large kitchen, where Curly's wife stood over a steaming kettle. 'Now, Martha,' said Curly, 'here's a guest for you. Remember the young man I told you about—him with the sweet voice that looks like your Hal looked? Here he is.'

Curly's wife turned and gazed at Leo. Then she threw up her hands and rushed over in greeting.

'It's Hal himself,' cried she, 'the spitting, living image!' She flung her arms round Leo's neck, nearly crushing the life out of him (for she was a big, bony woman). 'My Hal, my boy, come back after twenty years!' She relaxed her grip and held Leo at arm's length. Her face clouded slightly. 'No, no, you can't be, for Hal would be twenty years older than you, and you're not old enough. Ah, well and weary!'

'I'm so sorry I'm not Hal,' apologized Leo as soon as he could speak, 'but——'

'But nothing, my dear. It's no fault of yours. Now sit you, and don't you mind if I stare at you from time to time.'

Leo sat down, and all through tea listened with patience and charm to the story of Martha's boy Hal, by her first marriage. 'He ran away soon after I married Curly here, and I never heard of him since but for a post-card seldom or never.'

Leo shook his head mournfully during her recital. His resemblance to Hal was a fortunate accident, since Martha so cherished the remembrance of her wayward son. While she spoke she was plying Leo with food and tea, and Curly looked pleased for his wife to have found such a sympathetic listener.

'But there,' Martha said, when tea was done, 'you'll not want to hear me clack-clacking away all the time. Let's hear something from you for a change.'

'A song, maybe,' Curly suggested.

'A song it shall be,' agreed Leo, who had no wish to talk about himself.

They all sang together in the glow of the kitchen fire, while at intervals Curly got up to trim the oil lamps and



Martha padded to and from the oven where supper was cooking. Leo meanwhile was wondering how long he dared stay without seeming rude. So far he had found out exactly nothing about the inmates of the castle.

When Martha began to take down plates and dishes from the dresser he felt it was really time he left. Curly took out his pocket watch. 'So late already?' he remarked. 'Well, there's time for one more, then I must attend to my duty.'

While Leo was singing his last song he saw Martha setting a tray for two people. She suddenly paused. 'Think his appetite's come back tonight?' she asked Curly, 'or shall it be just soup?'

Leo involuntarily stopped singing. Curly glanced at him sharply, then at Martha. Leo recollected himself and pretended to tune one of his guitar strings.

'What's the rest—' Curly answered quietly, 'stew? Dish it up, then—at least we can offer it.'

As Leo rose to take his leave, the gaoler's wife was dishing up two bowls of stew which she placed on the tray along with a piece of cold tart and some coffee.

'Can you find your way out?' Curly asked, picking up the tray. 'The old lady will show you the door.'

Leo noted that Curly turned to the right outside the kitchen, and he could just hear his footsteps climbing some stairs while he himself bid Martha good night at the door.

'And come again soon,' Martha said. 'Bring your music again, and stay to supper.'

In the cold dark night Leo groped his way over the drawbridge. This time the guard made no trouble. 'Did old Martha fair talk your head off?' he asked. 'She's a proper old chatterbox—heart of gold, all the same. Know your way all right? That's good. If you meet any of the

other lads, just answer their challenge good and loud.
Good night.'

'Good night,' Leo responded.

It was really very hard to see where he was going, but as long as his footsteps continued to crunch on gravel there was no fear of straying. Nobody challenged him, although he had all his answers prepared. There was no sound at all but the *clump, clump, crunch, crunch* that he made himself.

Then everything hushed as he paused to look back on the castle. There was little enough he could see of it—just the outline like a black shadow against a grey screen, with a tower at each corner rising above the main walls. But from the far tower a thin slit of light looked out of an upper chamber.

Leo stared at the light until it seemed to split into three slices which danced apart and together. But when he closed one eye they blended into one thin slit, held in place he was sure by the curtains in front of the window. He was itching to look through that window; yet he must bide his time until the chance came to him.

It's terribly slow work, being a spy, he reflected; but this evening I don't see how I could have done more. And next time I won't hesitate to call again—for I'm sure Mrs. Curly likes me.

CHAPTER XIX

SO LEO MADE no move to leave the inn and continued to strive for the friendship and confidence of all who

called there. He had to wait only two days before Martha sent word by her husband to ask that young man to take pot luck at the castle. It was a cheerful evening, jollier than the last and much longer. In fact it was close upon midnight when Leo left.

But it taught Leo nothing new. At supper-time Curly disappeared with his tray, and at ten he excused himself for a minute whilst he went off to bring it back empty. Naturally enough, neither he nor Martha offered any explanation; while Leo as a polite guest was in no position to ask questions. Still, for its own sake he enjoyed his evening; and by the end they were calling him Leo, and he was calling them Curly and Martha.

By the end, too, he was hoping that anything he might do would not bring them into trouble or danger.

And there, as he stepped off the drawbridge, was the guard in the gatehouse all ready to say 'Pass, friend,' without bothering to ask first 'Who goes there?'

'You seem to have found yourself a home,' remarked the innkeeper's wife when Leo returned at midnight after his third visit.

Leo agreed with a cheerfulness stronger than he really felt. It wasn't so much his fresh attack of impatience; his old enemy, lack of money, was creeping alongside again. True, he had managed to pay all he owed to the innkeeper so far; but his small store of cash had once again that only-just look about it.

And then, of a sudden, the weather turned savagely cold. 'Winter comes early in these parts'—that's what they always told strangers to Wasserwick, meaning that you could expect frost and snow any time they chose to appear.

When Leo first saw the snow it gave him a dull heavy feeling inside. It reminded him that he had no overcoat

and that the few clothes he had were not enough to keep out such cold. Already the morning frosts stiffened the reeds by the lake and gave crispness to the grass. By mid-day the last patches of green disappeared under a steady fall of snow which looked fully determined to settle. 'Ay,' the innkeeper grumbled, 'I know this sort of weather. A few days and we'll all be cut off.'

Cut off! Leo thought. That would mean no more trips to the castle until the thaw came, which might be ages and ages away. Tonight he was going to see Curly and Martha—and it might be the last time! He must somehow find out, he *must*. . . .

The narrow moon rose just before it was time to move. The snow still fell, but he could follow the way pretty surely. Of the boundary guards he saw nothing; perhaps they were playing truant, sheltering somewhere out of the cold.

Leo started to whistle as he neared the gatehouse. There was no movement in response, although he waited an instant to be challenged. He moved forward cautiously.

'Is anyone there?' he called.

He heard a groan, and a voice replied slowly and with difficulty: 'Halt! (*ouch!*) Who goes (*oo-um!*) there?'

'It's only Leo, and that sounds like Benjie—and what on earth is the matter with you?'

He advanced, and in the glow of an oil-lamp he saw the guard sitting hunched up on the stone seat.

'It's my stomach (*mmm!*) Terrible things happen (*goodness!*) to it in cold weather like this (*brrr!*) Feels as if a lot of icy moths were fluttering round inside.'

'Oh dear, I'm so sorry,' said Leo. 'There's nothing I can do to help you?'

'Nothing, thanks (*whew!*) The best cure I know is to sit still. Maybe I'll be able to snooze off a bit later. I'm not supposed to, but no strangers are likely to be this way on such a filthy night (*ouch!*)'

'None,' agreed Leo fervently. 'Well, I hope you can sleep a bit. I'll try not to disturb you when I leave.'

'Thanks (*oom!*)—that's very considerate of you. Enjoy your (*gracious me!*) dinner.'

And that, Leo thought as he pulled the bell, may well be the best stroke of luck I've had. . . .

Martha and Curly that night were a little off-colour. Outwardly the evening went well: there were the same simple pleasures, of talking and eating and singing—but several times Curly grumbled about the cold. 'We're in for a hard spell,' he prophesied, and Martha shivered and nodded in gloomy agreement. 'A hard spell—and a long one,' she added, 'the moat's freezing over already.'

'The moat?' Leo said, looking up suddenly.

'Ay,' said Curly. 'Every so many years it freezes up entirely. You could walk on it, did you feel so foolishly inclined.'

For once, when Leo made preparations to leave, they did not attempt to retain him for just one more song. 'You'll be wanting to get back before the snow lays deeper,' Martha said; and Curly said, 'Like as not this'll be your last visit for a while. I've known the road here impassable for visitors for nigh on weeks and weeks.'

'Don't trouble to see me out,' Leo begged, hoping they wouldn't insist. He could feel his heart beginning to race at the thought of what he intended to do.

'Well, if you don't mind,' Curly said, as he drew himself close to the fire.

When Leo stepped into the open the snowflakes seized upon him and tickled his hands and face. He stood for an

instant stock-still. He heard no sound—good! Slowly, gently he crept across the drawbridge and paused again. Not a sign of life came from the gatehouse—good! He turned right and followed the moatside. He could only just see where he walked, for the night sky was choked with snow clouds. Each step he took left its mark, but immediately fresh snowflakes rushed in to cover his footprints.

As soon as he turned the corner he saw again the crack of light in the far tower. All at once he wanted somehow not to proceed. Supposing it wasn't King Purple up there—supposing it was some other king, or some other unknown stranger? Supposing . . .

He crept more and more cautiously until he stood opposite the base of the tower. The wide moat prevented his approaching any nearer, the moat round whose edges the ice was showing. By now his heart thumped so furiously that he ceased to feel the cold. This was the moment he had all his hopes on; now he would make himself known to the occupants of the tower chamber.

He blew on his fingers to warm them, then plucked a few soft notes out of his guitar. They sounded very muffled, but that was as well. On a still night too many people might hear.

He drew breath and as loud as he dared he sang:

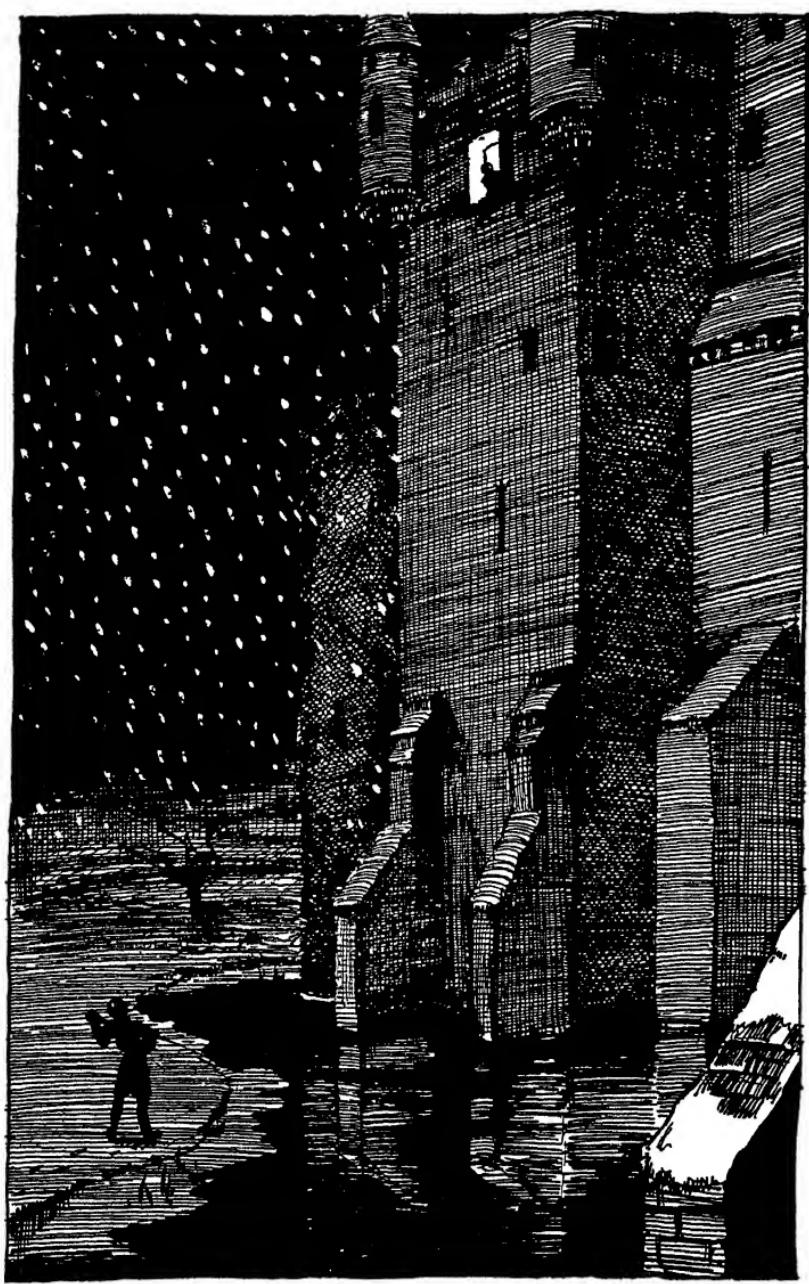
Florizel, Florizel

Tra la la, la la la la la la—

If you're King Purple pull the curtain wide.

Please let it be King Purple.

He paused and waited in the most dreadful suspense. Perhaps they hadn't heard, perhaps they were asleep, perhaps there was nobody in the room . . .



*Philomel, Philomel,
If you can hear me, please look out at me
Unless you're nobody I care about—*

Suddenly the curtains parted. A face looked out, but it wasn't the king's—it belonged to someone much younger. Just for a second it meant nothing to Leo, except a terrible, horrible sense of defeat. He had expected King Purple, hoped for King Purple, thought only of King Purple: and it wasn't, after all his expectations, hopes, and thoughts, King Purple—

Then whoever it was stepped back a little so that the light fell on his face; and . . . and . . . and . . . *oh-gracious-wondrous - marvellous - breathless - dreams - come - true - and thank - you - everyone - so - very - very- much:* it was Prince Florizel!

Leo could see him grappling with the window handle; then he jerked the window open and leant out of the narrow frame.

Hastily Leo began singing again:

*Florizel, Florizel,
Listen close to what I have to say,
Don't say a word and give the game away
—Just nod if you can hear me.*

Florizel heard and understood. He nodded vigorously and put his finger to his lips in token of his silence.

*Florizel, Florizel,
I'm going to save you in a day or two
Is poor King Purple there with you?—*

Florizel nodded again, and put his hands against his cheek to denote that his father was asleep.

Leo listened on all sides. He intended only to sing, so that if anyone overhead him they might not suspect the

reason. But it seemed pretty safe to talk and certainly it would be quicker.

'Listen, Florizel,' he called hoarsely: 'this is probably your only chance of escape. The snow's getting worse and the moat's freezing. The moment I can—the very moment it's safe—I'll return here and fetch you away. Be ready for me at all hours from tomorrow night on. You'll have to tie blankets and things together to let yourself down. Then you can cross the ice to my side. Bring two white sheets to disguise yourself—no, bring three; one for me. And if you can save a bit of food—understand? Good night.'

The prince did not utter a word, but gently closed the window and drew the curtains. Leo stole swiftly back, and bounced up and down on the drawbridge as though he had just left the gaoler. Then he walked boldly towards the gatehouse, where Benjie looked up at him in a suffering way.

'Poor Benjie,' said Leo in passing; 'if you're no better tomorrow I hope you'll stay in bed.'

'Thanks,' the guard wheezed; 'it's something (*umm!*) shocking just now. Got a bit of sleep, though—but something's (*ouch!*) mortal wrong with me. Why, a while back I (*grunt!*) I imagined I heard voices singing.'

'It *could* have been us in the kitchen, of course.'

'Yes, I s'pose it could,' Benjie agreed, 'come to think of it. Well, get you back safely. I reckon the (*ouf!*) snow will keep us apart for a while.'

CHAPTER XX

AGAIN KING PURPLE looked out from his room in the tower. It reminded him of a Christmas carol, the way the snow lay round about, deep, crisp—and even even, except where the wind had blown it into hillocks and drifts against such obstacles as trees and fences.

'Drat!' he exclaimed as he let the curtains fall to.

'Now, Daddy,' begged Florizel, 'don't get so impatient.'

'Why not?' retorted the king. 'Wouldn't you get impatient if you had nothing to do but wait and wait for the only possibility of escape?'

'Well, I *do* have to,' Florizel pointed out soothingly. His imprisonment, if it did nothing else, had certainly taught him to be patient and practical. Ever since Leo's appearance Florizel had been the one to take charge of things. 'Now, Daddy, don't *fret* so; it doesn't help. I tell you what, why don't you rehearse once more all we have got to do the moment we hear from Leo?'

King Purple shrugged his shoulders and sat down on the edge of his bed. 'Anything to keep my mind busy,' he said hopelessly; 'very well. First we seize the blankets and tear them into four strips each. Then we tie them together and twist them round and round. Then we throw them out of the window—'

'No, not yet,' Florizel interrupted.

'What?—Oh, first we tie one end to the settee against the window, then we let it out, then you climb down first, then I follow. And I shall be scared to death, and—'

The lock turned in the door and Curly came in.

'Well, you two, finished your supper? Let's have the tray then. Well, well, so you've eaten every crumb again,

have you? Can't think what's come over you these last days. Must be the cold; I judge you feel the cold more than us less delicate folks, considering the extra food you've been eating and the extra blankets you keep asking for.

'Go away,' said King Purple. 'And stop mocking us!'

He said it without anger, for it was what he said every night. Had he stopped to think about it he probably would have wondered. Because he really didn't dislike Curly as much as he might any other gaoler.

Curly shook his head sadly. 'Always the same harsh words. And in spite of it, I can't help having a sneaking liking for you royal folks. Still, we may get to understand each other in a few years.' He closed the door gently behind him and locked it.

In a few years, forsooth! King Purple only just refrained from telling the gaoler exactly by how much he overestimated their stay. A few years, indeed! More like a few minutes, or a few hours, or a few days or—oh, no: don't let it be as long as a few weeks. . . .

He went to the window again. A few large snowflakes lightly kissed the pane before falling dead. Not tonight: it would be once again not tonight. Unless——

'Florizel!' He summoned his son to the window.

'Yes, Daddy?'

'Florizel, look! Do you see what I see that isn't snow?'

The prince narrowed his eyes and stared hard at a black shape which struggled slowly towards the base of the tower.

'Quick—it must be; quick, quick!'

They would wait until they were sure before tearing up the blankets. Meanwhile overcoats, shoes, and the king's hat—and there were the hidden provisions to stuff into pillow-cases!

A minute or so later they heard Leo's soft whistle.
‘Coming, coming!’ called Florizel as he pushed open the window.

Then he and the king tore the bedclothes off and feverishly ripped them into strips. It was not an easy task, but the king's nail-scissors helped to start them off, and presently the prisoners were twisting the strips round and round, and knotting the ends and getting in each other's way, and taking it in turns to call out of the window: ‘We're nearly ready!'

They dragged the settee towards the window and securely tied the blanket-rope to it. Then they paid the blanket out of the window length by length, until there was enough to reach to the moat and back.

‘Now,’ Florizel said. He cocked a leg over the sill. ‘Drop the stuff down after me, Daddy.’ He slithered a little before descending arm over arm.

Leo was standing on the snow-topped ice of the moat ready to receive him.

‘All right!’ Florizel shouted hoarsely.

The sheets and the pillow-case of provisions dropped close to their feet, then Leo and Florizel awaited the king.

He was some time making up his mind. A long period seemed to pass before they saw first one leg then another. ‘Come on, Daddy!’ called Florizel urgently.

The rope jerked and down came the king a step at a time. Halfway down he slipped, and fell feet first into the snow. ‘Heave him out, quick!’ gasped Florizel. Jerk, pull, tug, *heave!*—and King Purple was safely among them.

‘The sheets,’ Leo whispered; ‘wrap them round you.’

All three draped themselves so that they showed up but little against the snow.

‘Grab the pillow-case, Florizel. Now follow me.’

The three ghostly figures shuffled off in silence. They



.followed Leo's footprints which pointed direct to the tower. King Purple had been about to say, 'Drat the snow! Will it never stop falling?'—but in time he realized that as their ally it would blot out their tracks.

Leo stopped only once to say, 'Careful! Now do as I do,' and off they went again. Twice he hesitated, as if seeing a guard or some such enemy, and his followers did the same. King Purple breathed hard with the effort of keeping up, but the will to escape stirred him on. The fence, though, he suddenly thought—how would they get past the fence?

'How——?' he began. Then he checked himself because they had reached the fence, and the snow was banked against it on both sides, and they needed only to climb up the snow ramp and down on the other side. . . .

All night they struggled against the snow. Ploughing deeply in the wake of the others, the king tried to think of all the lovely things that had happened in his life. But it required too much effort, for his mind kept rushing back to the horror of the present. He was thinking: I can't move another step; I am going to stop this instant even if they do catch me up. And much good may it do *them*, because all they will find is a block of ice or a snowman. Why doesn't Leo stop? Why do he and Florizel hurry so? I'm going to stop, I don't care. . . .

But he still dragged on, though his heart beat too fast to be good for it, and his breath escaped in quick steamy puffs.

Presently he took out his watch and moved it about in front of his face until he could read the time. Twelve minutes past, it said. In one more minute exactly they would have been walking for three hours. In one minute,

the king thought, I really will stop. While consulting his watch he had lagged a bit further behind. Bother Leo and Florizel!—had they no thought for a man old enough to be the father of both?

There—one minute, and a quarter for good measure. ‘Leo!’ he called sharply.

‘What is it?’ The others paused and turned round.
‘I can’t go any farther.’

‘Yes you can,’ answered Leo, heartlessly moving again.

‘Stop!’ the king shouted angrily. ‘Do as your king bids you!’

Leo and Florizel took no notice. The king felt a lump of self-pity come into his throat. Look at me, he thought—a proud king once, and now an old fool doddering away from his captors. Tired in body, with no one to offer me sympathy. Bound up with two heartless young people who forget that my limbs are less supple than theirs. Exhausted, unwanted, falling more and more behind. . . .

His eyes filled with tears.

‘Daddy,’ Florizel called.

King Purple wiped his eyes with a corner of the sheet he still wore, and saw the dark shapes of Leo and Florizel coming back for him. Each put an arm round his shoulder.

Leo said: ‘I was trying to be stern, but oh, Mr. King, we know how you feel. Only, you see, we must keep going as fast as we can, tonight of all nights. Don’t you see, they’ll be certain to come after us in the morning. So let’s struggle on until we really can’t go any farther; then we’ll look for a comfortable hiding place.’

‘Very well,’ said the king, ‘very well. That ever I should have to endure this!’

The unwanted thoughts began to hamper his mind again. If I’d known when I left Pelt that this would be

how I'd end up . . . I'll never be able to wear this suit again . . . and my shoes—wet through already, look as if they hadn't been cleaned for months . . . and there's a great hole in the heel of my sock I can see myself through . . . and my legs are so stiff that by the time I've finished they'll be no more use to me than my tattered socks . . . or my shoes . . . Months, did I say?—they don't look as if they'd *ever* been cleaned . . .

I hope Leo knows where he's going. He doesn't hesitate, but I don't see how anyone could tell. It all looks exactly the same to me: white, white, white, and a black sky on top with still more snow coming out of it. . . . Drag, drag, drag—there I go, courageously keeping on. Scrape, scrape, scrape; left foot, right foot, left, right—both as heavy as lead, and the hole in the left getting bigger and bigger. . . . If Leo doesn't know the way and we have to come back, I shall be furious with him. All the royal vengeance, if I have any left in me, shall fall about his head and ears. . . .

Leo was saying to Florizel: 'All I know is that if we keep going westwards we're sure to reach Patria some time, some part of it. I know we started off in the right direction, but with no stars to guide us it's difficult to be certain. If you think we're off our track at any time, do say so, won't you?'

Florizel nodded. He was at the moment too tired to answer.

Those two!—I can't think how Florizel keeps up with Leo. . . . Where did he get all that energy after so long in prison? Not from his poor old father, that's certain. They look like two ghosts with black legs, left, right, left, right . . . Leo takes longer strides than Florizel; one . . . two . . . one . . . two . . . Florizel goes one—two, one—two . . . he's much easier to keep in time with. If I kept in step with

Leo, I should fall even more behind, with my shorter strides . . . *Boots, boots, boots, boots, moving up and down again*—where did I learn that? In a poetry book somewhere. Something or other: ‘We’re foot slog-slog-slog-slogging over Africa,’ and somebody after marching many miles can think of only the marching feet. That’s the general idea of it; don’t let your eyes drop; don’t keep looking at the boots, boots, boots, boots, or they will get on top of you. ‘Try, try, try, try to think of something different’—I remember that line, then something about ‘Keep me from going lunatic. Boots, boots, boots, boots, moving up and down again.’

Florizel’s boots—they were nice, stout country shoes when he was kidnapped in them; and he hasn’t had much opportunity to wear them out. Madge and the doctor would be sadly exercised if they thought he was getting his feet wet . . . What nonsense!—it’ll do the boy no harm. Gracious, how manly he’s grown; a real credit to the throne! To think how we’ve guarded and molly-coddled him, all because he was a sickly baby. Why, even now Madge fears for Florizel when he gets his feet wet. As if he isn’t old enough to look after his own wet feet! I’ve got more than enough to worry about with mine . . . splosh, drag, splosh, drag . . .

And Leo still goes one . . . two . . . one . . . two. How does he keep it up? Look at him: up, down, up down—boots, boots, boots, boots . . .

Oh, goodness, why did I have to think of that? ‘Think of something different’—quick, quick! Think of my reception when I return to Pelt. A thousand throats shouting ‘Vivat Rex!’ That means vivat me. Think of their surprise when their true sovereign appears again; I almost envy them. ‘Vivat Rex, long live King Purple and Prince Florizel!’ Oh—‘and Queen Madge!’—though

they'll be more used to her. . . . We'll have a huge procession—and hang the expense!—with the carriages all spruced up, and the horses washed and polished, and several bands playing martial music, and mounted guards, and a picked selection of foot-soldiers . . . and we'll parade rejoicingly through every street in the city, marching, marching, marching . . . boots, boots, boots, boots, moving up and down again. Oh dear, there I go!

King Purple had only enough breath to call out 'Hi!' before he collapsed exhausted.

When he recovered his senses he was under cover, and Leo was soothingly saying: 'Feeling better, Mr. King? You did very, very well; and Florizel and I are both mightily proud of you.'

'Thank you, thank you both,' the king replied humbly. 'Where are we?'

'We're in a sort of cave we found in the bank by the lane we were following. It's sheltered and quite warm and hidden. We thought we'd sleep here a while.'

'Sleep, yes, good,' the king murmured.

Florizel sat down beside him and yawned. Then he lay down close to his father, and presently Leo snuggled beside them. The cave filled with steam from their warming-up clothing . . .

The rest of the night passed over them unnoticed; then the dawn, the early morning, and high noon. Still the three fugitives slept on. Sometimes one, sometimes another would stir in his sleep, or speak a few words aloud. But for the most part the cave was full of stillness.

Suddenly Leo sat up. Something was amiss, and he hadn't dreamt it. He listened hard until it came again: the baying of a hound.

Excitedly he shook the king and Florizel.

'Don't say a word, but—listen!'
The hound was in full cry.
'Keep still!' said Leo.

There was enough light in the cave to show him the haggard, weary-eyed faces of his companions. From where they sat little could be seen of the outer world but a patch of the snow reflecting the redness of a wintry sun.

The dog howled again. 'Brr!' exclaimed the king. He was all aches and pains, and hunger was gnawing him. Florizel sat with his mouth slightly open, his eyes fixed in an anxious stare.

'A wolfhound,' said Leo; 'they're already on our track.'
'What can we do?' asked the king.

'Nothing,' Leo said, 'but keep still. I'll go out and meet them, and pretend I'm alone: that it's my tracks the dogs have been following. I may have to join them for a while, in which case you must go on alone. I'll go out now.'

He crept out of the cave into a beautiful winter's day. No longer did any snow fall; the rich red sun had the sky all to itself. He looked over the level country where their footprints made a track like the whisk of a broom across a dusty floor. Bounding towards him, his nose to the ground, came a solitary wolfhound.

Leo looked farther afield, but there were no more dogs, nor any men.

'Well!' he said in some relief, and stood still until the dog was on him.

The wolfhound sniffed curiously at Leo's legs, then it seemed to be thinking, then it followed the footprints into the cave.

'Help!' Leo heard the king call. 'Take the monster away! Down, sir—stop licking my face! Get your dirty wet paws off me!'

Then Florizel staggered out, lugging the hound by the collar.

'Good dog!' he said, patting its back. 'Good fellow, clever boy! For goodness sake, Leo, whistle him over to you, will you?'

Leo whistled, and the wolfhound loped in the play-



fullest mood. He jumped up and down, placing his paws on Leo's shoulder, licking his face and making whining noises.

Florizel and the king emerged into the daylight.

'Is that all?' asked King Purple. 'I mean, aren't we going to be shot by the guards and beaten to death?'

'I don't see any more; and this one is most friendly.'

'What's it say on his collar?' asked Florizel, noticing a brass tab.

'It says—hold still, you fidgety hound!—it says: "To all doggy-lovers. My name is Holdfast. If lost please return me to Prug State Police, Wasserwick Division".'

'So they have discovered our flight,' said King Purple. 'Oh dear, oh dear! What can we do?'

'We must push on,' said Leo, 'as soon as we've eaten something. I'm famished. Let's look in the pillow-cases.'

They ate some of their store, and stuffed snow in their mouths for lack of something to drink. The wolfhound sat by them, snapping at the scraps they offered him. When it was over they stretched their stiff limbs and resumed their way.

'Go home, boy,' they commanded the hound, pointing the way back. 'Go home, Holdfast!'

But Holdfast would not obey, and there was no time to lose; so the wolfhound went joyfully beside them.

CHAPTER XXI

SEATED AT HIS favourite desk in the Palace in Gulch, King Decimal was having an interesting time studying his engagement-book. Queen Livia stood beside him looking over the king's shoulder. Although not exactly smacking their lips, they displayed other signs of pleasant anticipation.

'Hum, hum,' said the king, slowly turning a page at a time; 'hmm! I see, my dear, we have no engagements on the twentieth, twenty-second and twenty-third.'

'But that's so soon before Christmas,' the queen pointed out. 'A triumphal entry in the New Year would be so much more convenient. And more suitable, I feel—a new year, a new king, a new reign.'

The king nodded and reached for the next year's engagement-book. It was full of blank pages, and the few entries scattered through the book were mainly regular ones, such as 'Livia's Birthday', 'Royal Farm Society Cattle Show', 'Our Wedding Anniversary'.

'What about the first week in January?' he suggested.

'As you wish,' said the queen. 'I have nothing that week, as I remember, which I could not cancel at a pinch.'

'What exact day—the first, second, third . . . ?'

'The first,' said the queen. 'The dawn of the year, the dawn of a new era.'

The king nodded again, then took up a quill pen which he dipped gently into the silver inkwell. He ran his tongue round his mouth as he wrote in his best hand on the page headed 1st January: 'Triumphal Entry into Patria'. The queen watched him eagerly, and King Decimal held up the book to read over his entry. As an afterthought he again dipped the quill in the ink and added: 'to make formal claim on the throne'.

He still did not know that the true King of Patria was at large. Very few did as yet, and those few were so scared that they kept the knowledge to themselves. It can truly be said that Donjon Keep was in a turmoil. It had bubbled and seethed since breakfast-time on the morning Curly had carried the bacon and eggs to the tower room and found nobody to eat them. He had hurriedly summoned the guards, and the guards had hurriedly scampered all ways over the castle grounds. All they

found was the faint traces of a few footsteps. So few had the snow left unhidden that no one suspected that there were three different sorts and not only two.

'We daren't tell the king!'—that was the topmost thought of everyone. King Decimal, they knew, would punish them all. They were all involved—guards and gaoler alike; all had been ordered, on pain of death, to ensure that the royal prisoners remained in captivity. Why, they were threatened with almost as much if they breathed a hint outside their own circle about who were their prisoners.

It was in a more and more advanced state of agitation that they gathered from time to time to discuss the next step. They had tried *everything*—everything, that is, that they could try without calling on others to help. They had organized a pursuit the moment the escape was discovered—a real pursuit with dogs and guns, which had lasted the whole long day (and what a day! Tripping and stumbling, and snow flying everywhere, and getting lost, and stopping every few minutes to dig the stupid dogs out of the drifts). They had telephoned the brother of one of the guards, who had a house beside the road the fugitives might take, to take him into their confidence and beg him to keep an eye open. But that was to no avail, for the telephone wires were fallen beneath their snowy load, and the instrument said nothing but 'Snap, crackle, pop!'

They had spent a whole afternoon making up a tissue of lies between them, a story that might deceive King Decimal. The royal prisoners had eaten something that didn't agree with them. They fell very ill, and Martha nursed them all she could. They couldn't get a doctor because then he would know the secret—no, not because of that: it was because they couldn't get to Wasserwick

owing to the snow. In spite of all Martha did, one morning the unhappy pair curled up and died. We are very sorry, Your Majesty, but it wasn't really our fault.

Very probably King Decimal would say: 'Oh well, it can't be helped. It was an accident.' He would look solemn, but inside he would feel pleased and relieved, for he would think, that's a big responsibility off my mind, and nobody can put the blame on me. . . .

No, he wouldn't, though. He would say: 'Well, where are they—the corpses?' 'Please, Your Majesty, we buried them——' No, we didn't. You could never tell with King Decimal; he was the sort of king who wanted proof.

So that would never do at all. . . .

Well, what about this? A terrible thing, Your Majesty—the dastardly prisoners made a dastardly attempt to escape! Fortunately we were quick to act, and we set out after them with dogs. And then—oh, Your Majesty, we don't know how to tell you this—the dogs were so excited when they caught them that they ate up both King Purple and the prince entirely. It was the most horrible accident, and we're all humble and sorry.

How about it? King Decimal couldn't ask for proof then; there would be no corpses. And yet—he might ask to see the dogs. If he did he would see at a glance they weren't of the man-eating kind. They were capable of sniffing a trail, with their delicate trained noses, but their elderly mouths looked too gummy to be dangerous. No . . . no—a pity, but no.

The final suggestion came from Benjie, who was almost too excited to explain it. 'I've got it, I've got it!' he shouted, as he burst in on the assembly. 'I've got the very idea.'

'What is it?' asked Curly.

It was some time before Benjie could get the words out. Then:

'We could burn down the castle,' he cried. 'Don't you see? Fire all around, and smoke everywhere, and the prisoners caught like rats in a trap. "Oh, Your Majesty," we could tell him, "a most terrible thing. The prisoners burnt, and no chance of saving them. It was a terrible accident, and we loyally beg you to forgive us." There—how's *that* for a clever plan?'

There was a polite but doubtful murmur.

'No good,' said Martha firmly. 'Twould be burning the very roof from over Curly's and my heads.'

'You could get another,' said Benjie.

'Not as solid and firm as this, nor such a job to go with it.'

'Besides,' added Curly, 'the old castle won't burn. Too solid and stony and thick. Look!'

He got up, struck a match on the wall, and held it there. The match flickered and burnt itself out.

'See?' said Curly. He sat down wearily and thoughtfully smoothed his bald head. 'The fact is,' he went on, 'we've exhausted our ideas. There isn't another between us. We need some fresh brains to bear, someone sharp. Come to think of it, wish we had that young vagabond chap, young Leo, with us. He was a sharp young fellow, *he'd* have thought up something, I'll wager. Wouldn't mind making an exception and bringing him into our confidence. Wonder where he went to? Slipped away sort of sudden.'

'Lucky him,' said one of the guards. 'Wish *we* could slip out of *this*.'

'And what,' Martha asked, 'when King D. takes over Patria. *He'll* look funny if the first person to welcome him is old King P. himself.'

'Well, King Purple ain't there yet,' said another guard.
'We'd have heard tell soon enough if they was.'

'I still say,' said Benjie, 'they both perished on the way. Bless me, no human fugitive couldn't abide all that weather.'

'I hope you're right,' Curly said. 'Not that I've anything against 'em personal.'

'Except,' added Martha, 'they got us into this stew.'

Queen Madge was in one of her royal tempers again.
'A thousand, thousand insults on his head!' she stormed.
'If I could but think of them.'

Her counsellors stood trembling while she crushed the document she held into a ball. She glared at them in turn.

'What now, idiots?' she demanded. 'Gape, gape—like a lot of flounders on a fishmonger's marble slab! Say something, suggest something! Declare war, send out assassins!'

'Your Majesty,' began the Lord Chief Justice calmly, 'what more can we do? We must, alas, by now assume that his glorious Majesty and his gentle Royal Highness are . . . are no more——'

'I refuse to believe it!'

The Lord Chief Justice made a hopeless but respectful movement with his hands. 'And consequently His Majesty King Decimal has the legal right to claim the throne——'

'Legal right, legal right! Who cares a fig about what's legal?'

The Lord Chief Justice looked slightly pained, but his voice didn't waver. 'We have expected this move for some time, and his—somewhat brusque, if I may say so—announcement is therefore less of a shock than it could have been.'

'Not to me it isn't,' asserted the queen.

'It is therefore my opinion,' concluded the Lord Chief Justice, 'that we can do nothing to resist His Majesty. At the same time, there is nothing illegal in receiving him with a very minimum of welcome and enthusiasm.'

'I shall see to that,' the queen assured him. 'Ooh, just wait until I give my mind to that! I can imagine a thousand traps and torments: apple-pie beds, gongs and whistles outside his bedroom all night, blotting-paper pellets in his inkwells, poison in his wine . . .'

She had brightened a little, and was almost purring like a cat planning its next mousing expedition. The counsellors seized the opportunity and respectfully bowed themselves backwards out of her presence.

It was getting close to Christmas, but there was no gaiety in Patria. PATRIA MAKES NO PREPARATIONS—(so ran the headlines of one of the most influential newspapers) FOR THE SADDEST CHRISTMAS IN HISTORY. Christmas-tree shops reported a negligible sale of Christmas trees; poulters looked like being left with most of their poultry on hand. Coloured-paper manufacturers might as well have stuck to making ordinary white paper; hosiers sold no more stockings than were needed for the usual purpose of keeping the legs warm.

A Merry Christmas, forsooth!—a mere mockery. As to a Happy New Year, who could feel happy when a foreign king was coming to take the throne and absorb gallant little Patria into bullying great Prug?

'It's all right for you,' grumbled King Purple; 'you're used to walking. Look at all the practice you had walking to Wasserwick.'

This was one of his bad mornings. He had them sometimes, especially when the weather was unkind. While the mood lasted King Purple would be stubborn, sharp,

obstinate, rude, unkind and tiresome. Then he would sulk for a while, and emerge from his sulks apologetic and fairly cheerful.

'I won't walk another step—hear me?'

'Yes you will,' Leo said calmly.

'Rebel!' snapped the king. 'Ingrate and rebel!'

'What's an ingrate?' asked Florizel.

'Someone who's ungrateful. Like Leo.'

'Please, Daddy, calm yourself. *You're* the one who's ungrateful. As for being a rebel——'

'There you go, siding against your old father again! Rebels, both of you! Why, I shouldn't be surprised if you weren't plotting to seize the throne from me. Go on, then—seize it; and just see what happens!'

'Hoity-toity,' said Leo.

'All right, that settles it. You can go on alone, and I'm going to find the nearest village and hire a car.'

'And risk being recognized, and getting recaptured at the frontier, and having no money to pay for it? Listen, Mr. King—just once again, please. We've done pretty well so far, and it would be foolish now to take any risks. We may be sure King Decimal has taken every measure to trap us, and the only reason we've got so far is because we've been cautious. What if King Decimal does reach Pelt before you? You have only to push him off the throne, and he'll look even more foolish. Now, sit down and rest for a while, and we'll sing a roaring song and feel better for it . . .'

What a time this has been! thought Leo. Day after night, after day after night; tramping and sleeping, and wearily resuming in fine weather or foul. And the burden of everything had fallen on him. He was the one to spy out the land while the others stole an extra hour's sleep. He alone had explored the villages, singing and begging

for coins with which to buy food and drink to last until next day. He it was who had gleaned the news of the day from the tavern gossips and the borrowed newspapers. (Nothing about the escape of King Purple and Prince Florizel; they were keeping that secret. But plenty about King Decimal. ‘On January the First our glorious sovereign will formally enter Patria, whereupon the crowns of that country and ours will be united and Patria will be absorbed into our fatherland.’) Leo, too, had acted the while as a jester should, lightening King Purple’s gloom with stories and riddles and snatches of song. But it hadn’t been easy—oh, it hadn’t been easy! Florizel, bless him, had helped when he could; but Florizel wasn’t in too good shape. You couldn’t expect it, Leo supposed, after he had spent so long in idleness.

There had been scares and adventures from time to time. They had been stopped twice by village police, and all but arrested for vagrancy. Indeed, their appearance gave every excuse, for no rougher and scruffier trio could be imagined. Each time Leo pulled them out of the scrape by explaining that they were detectives in disguise. To prove it he showed them the inscription on the hound Holdfast’s collar—then hurried them all away before the police could ask any more questions. They had been chased out of a barn, halfway through a sound sleep, by a farmer with an antique gun. They had been lost for two days in a wilderness. They had been set on by dogs, and saved only by the ferocious barking and bristling of Holdfast. . . .

No, it hadn’t been easy. And there were still—how many days? ahead of them. And here was the king in the dumps again, sitting on a stone and pouting, and refusing to join in the cheering-up song which Leo and Florizel and Holdfast were singing so lustily.

CHAPTER XXII

THE WEATHER CHANGED for the warmer, then cooled off again; then it made a great effort to defeat the snow. Slowly the temperature crept up, and each time it moved the snow on the ground became moister. Then the great mass began to flow into the ditches and streams, while the white crust buckled and sank lower.

At Wasserwick there was just enough left to call it a white Christmas. In the park surrounding the castle tufts of reeds and grass showed through the ragged white covering. Down in the village they were preparing to visit each other with presents and good wishes. Everybody was very gay.

Only the castle folk were gloomy. There was still no word in the papers of King Purple's return to his country, which could mean that he had perished on the way—but then you couldn't tell for sure with royalty.

'At least we must try to enjoy it,' said Martha, referring to Christmas Day, for which she had made the usual preparations. She had invited all the guards to share her hospitality; some for lunch, some for dinner. They couldn't all come at one time, since it was necessary to keep up a show of patrolling the castle grounds.

The sight of the midday goose and plum-puddings did much to drive away dull care. Nor had Curly and Martha omitted to decorate the kitchen with streamers, rosettes and tinsel. There was also a tall tree cut from the small spinney near the castle, with dozens of coloured candles attached to the branches.

The goose rapidly disappeared into the mouths of the guards and their hosts, and it looked a sorry sight by the

time everyone had politely refused, then apologetically accepted, second and third helpings. A mass of vegetables went down with it, along with different wines and ale.

Then came the Christmas pudding. 'There's a lucky silver horseshoe in it,' Martha warned them, 'so be careful how you swallow.'

Everybody poked their slices with spoon and fork, until Curly jumped up with an excited cry.

'All stop looking,' he exclaimed, 'I have it!'

There was much laughter and congratulating, and good-natured chaffing about Martha having arranged it that way.

'Anyway, best of luck, Curly.'

'Oh ay,' Curly said. 'That means good luck for me all right. Just when I need it too.'

Then the door burst open and in rushed the gatehouse guard.

'Horrors,' he gasped, 'we're undone!'

All the laughter and talking ceased.

'Guess what?—No, I won't waste time making you guess. There's a big man arrived on a motor-cycle. King's Messenger. Has a special Christmas message from the king to King P. Says he must deliver it in person. I said he couldn't see the king—wasn't convenient; king was asleep, king was busy, king was ill—*infectious disease*, I said, though I didn't think of that bit till later. And', panted the guard in the greatest agitation, '*he's... outside... now... and... won't... leave... without... seeing... King... Purple!*'

In another part of the country—far, far away, as the crow flies—King Purple had reached the end of his endurance. The sun and the stars, in leading them ever towards the west, had landed the three in a barren heath.

A storm came up on Christmas Eve, driving them to the shelter of a miserable, disused hovel. Inside it was damp and depressing; yet to venture outside would be foolish.

On Christmas morning King Purple wandered into the storm before the others awoke, and led them a difficult chase. Leo and Florizel went separate ways, and it was only the sound of the king's voice which enabled Leo to find him.

The king was a pitiful sight as he stood in his tatters shouting at the weather. His clothes hung about him in wet strips; his toes clearly showed through his gaping shoes; his hat was all but detached from the brim; his straggly hair mingled with his rough beard. . . .

I shall never again be able to regard him with fear and respect, Leo thought. He approached with great caution lest the king should suffer shock from anything sudden. Then he stood a way off while the king flung his arms about, waiting until he should calm down.

'Blow away, then, you bad-tempered wind!' King Purple was shouting. 'Burst your cheeks with blowing—and see if I care! Rain as much as you like—flood the whole country, if you think it's clever! Why don't you turn to snow, if you feel like it?—turn me into a snowman, make me whiter than I am!'

'Mr. King,' Leo said gently, 'you're not doing yourself any good out in the open. And it's stupid to waste your breath on the weather—it won't take notice even of a king.'

'Pour away,' roared King Purple, taking no heed of the interruption, 'I don't blame you! It's Decimal I blame. *He* led me into all my troubles; he's the one I'm furious with, not you. Oh, my poor sorrowing queen! Oh, I shall never see my daughters again! Blow me to

pieces, drench me to the bone—I won't even put up an umbrella against you.'

'All the same,' said Leo drawing closer, 'there's no need to get any wetter than you must. Why not come with me?'

He put his arm round the befuddled king and led him towards the hovel. As he walked he sang a soothing little nonsense song to calm the king:

*A codfish and a mouse,
That cost me each a penny,
Would wander round my house
And give surprise to many.
The codfish bit my toe
As I dozed by the lake,
And I of pain cried Woe,
And turned my sleep to wake.*

The king made a brave attempt to grin. 'Thank you, Leo my boy,' he said, 'I know you're doing your best for me. If I live through this I will be good to you. I will try to be patient. I won't say any more—I feel better now. Let's go into the hovel. Is Florizel there? Hullo, Florizel—are you cold? I'm freezing. Give me a little of that straw to cover me. Bless me, to think I should ever be glad of the vile stuff! Well, it's no fleecy blanket, but it's better than nothing. Now, you boys entertain each other while I sleep.'

The storm on the heath was as nothing compared with the one going on in King Decimal's palace. It would be talked about in hushed voices as long as the last witness survived. At present, however, it seemed improbable that anyone would survive.

King Decimal stalked up and down roaring in several places at once. Never, *never* had any king been in so

awful a rage! The palace staff fled at the sound of his approach, the glass tinkled on the mantelpieces, the very pictures hovered on the walls. In every room people and pets were in hiding. The bulkier ones stood trembling behind curtains; the slimmer ones slipped under sofas and divans; the rest who were too scared to think stood like statues and tried to wish themselves into invisibility.

Queen Livia's pekinese cowered in her workbasket; King Decimal's spaniel leapt into a chandelier; within its gilded cage the canary spun fearfully round and round trying to fit itself into a water-bowl three sizes too small.

In every other room people were having hysterics. There was none to attend them, for the Court Physician had already fainted.

Rumble, bang, slam, roar and rumble! Here came the king again, kicking at the woodwork, ripping down curtains, climbing up bell-ropes, tearing doors off their hinges, throwing coal through the window-panes, upsetting furniture . . . and all the time howling and shouting the fearfulest oaths. . . .

It was Christmas night, and outside the sweet-voiced carol singers were trilling 'Peace on earth, goodwill towards men.'

'Hang and shoot everyone!' thundered the king. 'Torture them, burn them at the stake—guilty and illocent—I mean, iltiy and guinnocent alike! What do I mean?'

'There you see; you're getting tongue-tied, and you're wasting your breath,' said Queen Livia. 'Now, calm down, Decimal; let's look at this matter sensibly. Pick up that chair and sit down.'

The chair shook in King Decimal's trembling grasp. But he did as the queen said, and sat down, and glared at her under his bristling eyebrows.

'Now, Decimal, don't say a word—not one grunt, mind—until I've finished. I know this is a shock, and I know how angry—not to say foolish—you feel. But—and it's a big but—think carefully. If Purple and the boy have been at liberty for so long, *why . . . haven't . . . we . . .*



heard . . . about . . . them? Why aren't they back in Patria? Why?—I'll tell you why. Because they perished in the cruel winter weather. Nobody could have survived it—that's what the miserable gaoler said, didn't he?"

King Decimal relaxed a trifle. "Pon my soul, Livia, you may be right. 'Pon my heart and soul, I believe you may."

'Therefore, Decimal, we proceed with our plans as though nothing had happened. A week from today, the show must go on.'

'But to make sure,' the king said, 'I'll have every step of the frontier watched. You must help me to frame a description of what Purple and Florizel must look like. And let every traveller who answers to it be held up for investigation. If the wretches are dead, not even their ghosts shall pass into Patria unquestioned.' He looked much more at ease. 'My goodness, I was put out, wasn't I? I feel better now. Come, let us drink to the New Year.'

CHAPTER XXIII

RIIGHT AHEAD THEY could see the hills of North Patria.

'Home!' said King Purple sentimentally, while the hound Holdfast let out a whine.

'Not yet,' said the more realistic Leo, 'there's the frontier between us.'

'We could be over by this afternoon,' said Florizel. 'The sooner we get out of this horrid Prug——'

Holdfast whined again, miserably.

'What's the matter, boy—don't you want us to leave?' The hound grizzled a third time.

'Come,' said King Purple, 'I'm all impatience.'

He almost ran down the slope they stood upon; it was hard to restrain him. Leo, indeed, felt a little alarmed at his lack of caution, for not only were they still in danger of capture, but here at the frontier the danger was

greatest. However, it was worth anything to have the king in so cheerful a mood. Since that awful wet day on the heath he had found new courage.

There was only one path they could take at this point, a narrow road through high mountain walls. Then the mountains flattened out into a valley, and through the valley the River Flussen flowed north and south and divided the two kingdoms.

'And somehow,' said Leo, 'we have to cross *that*.'

King Purple slowed up from a shambling trot to a slow drag, and then to a stop.

'How?' he asked, as his face fell.

Leo shrugged his shoulders. 'I don't know. We must wait till we get there.'

They proceeded more gently. The path opened out and pointed directly towards a small town by the riverside. They stopped again.

'We don't want to go there,' said Florizel. 'All those people . . .'

'But there is a bridge,' the king said. 'See it?'

'And,' Leo added, 'it'll be guarded.'

The hound sat on his haunches looking at his companions. He could not understand their delay, nor why they must look so worried.

'I don't see what else we can do,' Leo said presently. 'It's a chance we must take. Besides, it isn't a bad day to choose—New Year's Eve; they'll all be good-humoured and thinking of parties.'

Slowly, and with the appearance of those ready to turn and run at a half-second's notice, they descended the path.

It was dusk by the time they reached the outskirts, and the few people they met did not stare unduly hard at the tatterdemalion travellers. It was not until they were

inside the town, with the street lamps picking them out, that they came in for notice.

They huddled together, the king in the middle, saying never a word and being as unworthy of notice as possible. Their hearts beat in rapid time; they imagined that everyone stopped talking as they passed and turned round to glare at them. We do look a bit suspicious, each thought, as they saw themselves reflected in the glass of an empty shop window.

A company of soldiers came down the street, and instinctively the three crowded towards the wall. They hurried faster after the soldiers had gone.

'What are those things the men have on their sleeves?' whispered King Purple suddenly.

'Sh! I don't know,' answered Leo and Florizel together.

They had been wondering themselves why every man in the town, whether gaffer or stripling, wore a white armband with S.V.F.P. on it.

'Something something something Prug,' guessed King Purple, after turning the matter over and over.

'St. Vincent's Fire Patrol,' whispered Florizel.

'Why St. Vincent?' the king asked.

'Sh!' Leo hissed.

Then they crossed the main street which led to the bridge. The king made to turn down it, but the pressure of Leo diverted him to a side road.

The town was growing cheerful as night came on. From the houses came snatches of song and early party noises. Ahead was a tavern through whose windows the lights bade a welcome. There the noises were loudest—the chatter and the laughter of people assembled for pleasure.

Before there was time for the three to pass by the tavern door opened and two soldiers staggered out



right in their path. It was too late to avoid a collision, and the unfortunate Florizel bumped into the pair of them.

'Murder!' one of them cried, and put up his fists, while the other danced round the king as if he expected him to flee.

Leo summoned his wits and interposed.

'Please, sir,' he said in a whining voice, 'please, sir, it wasn't our faults. We're only poor beggars, sir, not ones to pick a quarrel. See, sir, my poor old dad here—a human wreck, sir, not a penny to bless him with. And oh, sir, have pity on that poor lad you are a-threatening! He won't do no harm, sir—he's simple, sir, as I should know, being as he's my little brother.'

'Leave him be, comrade,' one of the soldiers said.

The other one dropped his fists.

'Just what you say, friend. I never hit a beggar yet on New Year's Eve.'

'That's right,' said the first. 'Hey, I've got an idea! New Year's Eve—we'll take the poor vagabonds in for a glass of ale. Come on, you soldiers of fortune, there's plenty inside. Come and meet our old friend the sergeant. And what's that you have there—a guitar? Ah, you can give us a song or two.'

'Oh, please sir,' whined Leo, gently trying to pull away, 'my poor old father never drinks. Ooh, sir, could you but see his shocking condition inside! Ale, sir, is poison to him. As for wine—'

King Purple vigorously nodded his head, although the mention of wine made his mouth water. Florizel too played his part well, making gibbering noises and open-mouthed gestures.

But the soldiers would not be refused. With rough hospitality they goaded the king and the prince into the

brightly lit tavern. Leo followed reluctantly, with Holdfast hard on his heels.

'Here you are, sergeant mine—guests who is passionate to meet you.'

The unwilling three stared at the biggest soldier they ever saw in their lives. He had shoulders as wide as a doorway, feet like ferryboats, and a small bullet head with a stupid-looking face in front.

'Well, how *are* you?' he roared as he put down his tankard and held out a twice life-sized fist.

'Please, sir,' wheezed Leo, 'we're not at all well. My old father here, he's a-wandering in his mind, and my brother, sir, is simple.'

'Well, what a to-do,' roared the sergeant. 'Ho, bartender—a bottle of wine for them as is less fortunate than you or me! Siddown!' he invited, in a quieter roar that was meant to be friendly.

The three sat at the table with the sergeant and the soldiers, feeling far from home. They waited in silence while glasses and wine were brought; then they nervously sipped away while the sergeant swallowed draught after draught.

'Now, a song!' roared the sergeant at Leo, who was only too glad to do something to ease the tension.

He sang them 'The City of Gulch is the World's Fairest Town', and by special request 'The Steed's Farewell to his Arab', and 'The First New Year's Eve'.

'And now', roared the sergeant, jumping to his feet, 'let's drink a toast to the King.'

'Oh, thank you,' murmured King Purple bashfully. He remembered himself in time to pass it off with a cough. Leo shot him a glance, and the party stood up.

'The King,' roared the sergeant.

'The King,' replied the others, Florizel and Leo slyly tilting their glasses at King Purple.

The sergeant wiped his mouth on his sleeve and sat down. 'And tomorrow, just think,' he said, 'he'll be King of Patria as well.'

'Wonder how old Queen Madge'll take to *that*!' said one of the soldiers with a laugh.

'She won't,' said the other, 'but that ain't going to help her any.'

'If I was her,' roared the sergeant, 'I'd be right glad to be quit of that old fool Purple.'

Sitting next to the king Leo could feel him beginning to tremble. 'Please, sir,' he said hurriedly, 'I think my poor old father is not very well. I think we should go now. And my poor brother isn't used to all this kindness. Truly he isn't.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' roared the sergeant hospitably. 'Why, they look as bright as my brass buttons; why——'

He was staring hard at King Purple and Prince Florizel. Leo saw a cloud of perplexity creeping over his face.

'Why——' His voice dropped. 'That's funny.'

'What's funny?' asked the soldiers.

'Hush a moment.' The sergeant fumbled in his pockets until he found a folded piece of paper. 'Hark at this, lads. "The older one is elderly with greying hair now probably very grey and probably a rough beard. . . . Dark suit . . . hard hat . . . speaks with a Patrian accent. . . . The younger . . . looks about sixteen . . . a bit plump, but probably only a little bit by now . . . country clothes . . . also speaks with a Patrian accent . . . dead or alive . . . no questions to be asked. . . .'

The sergeant replaced the paper and had another close look.

'Could be,' he said. 'What do you say, men?'

The two soldiers nodded. The sergeant turned to Leo.
‘Well, what have you to say?’ he roared.

Leo’s heart leapt to his mouth, so that he had to wash it back with a gulp of wine.

‘Please, sir, I—I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ he whimpered.

‘Fugitives,’ answered the sergeant, doing his best not to roar, ‘haven’t you seen the notice? A couple of fugitives—name not supplied nor photograph, only description—expected to make for the frontier. Keep your eyes open; muster every man on the border. And these two, I must say, answers pretty well.’

‘They couldn’t,’ replied Leo firmly, ‘because there are three of us.’

‘That’s true,’ agreed the sergeant. He drank another draught of ale while he thought things out. Then: ‘Hey!’ he roared, ‘why aren’t you mustered in the S.V.F.P.? Orders is every man’s got to be until the fugitives is found.’

‘Well, we’re only too *glad* to be—we *want* to be,’ Leo assured him.

‘So you should,’ roared the sergeant; ‘so should every loyal citizen. Private—where are their armbands?’

The soldier rose from the table to search in the pockets of his overcoat which hung near the door. He returned with the armbands and fastened one on King Purple, Prince Florizel and Leo.

‘You are now,’ said the sergeant, ‘members of the State Volunteer Frontier Patrol. Your orders is, keep watch for two important fugitives, description as per—where’s the paper? Here—this. You may be called on to keep guard in the mountains, along the river, or at the bridges at any time—and no grumbling, see? And heaven help you if they get by, see?’

'Thank you,' said Leo fervently; 'and please may we go now?'

At midnight they could just hear the chimes echoing up from the town.

'Happy New Year!' exclaimed Florizel gleefully, embracing his father and Leo, and dancing about on the turfу hillside.

'It isn't New Year yet,' his father reminded him. 'There's an hour's difference in the time here. Remember—remember,' he choked a little, 'we're in Patria!'

'Patria, Patria,' Florizel repeated: 'Oh Daddy, oh Leo—who would have believed it?' He burst into laughter. 'Those volunteers at the bridge—oh my!'

Leo was laughing too. 'Poor things, their gratitude when we offered to relieve them!'

'"Now we can spend New Year's Eve at home," they said,' quoted Florizel—'and Daddy said under his breath, "So can we". Oh, my goodness!'

'And they said, "Where's your guns?" and we said, "We haven't any; but we've got a special police dog".'

'Good old Holdfast,' said Florizel. 'I'm sorry he left us. Did you notice how he came just as far as the middle of the bridge, and then went back?'

'But what *I* want to know,' said King Purple, 'is why there were no Patrian guards on *our* side of the bridge. I must have it looked into—most lax and careless!'

An hour later, when the New Year was officially allowed into Patria, it brought a further stroke of luck. Down a wild country lane a lorry threw its headlights upon them. The driver obligingly stopped and asked where they were going. To Pelt?—he was sorry, he wasn't going that far. But he was going as far as the trunk road. Should be there reasonably early in the morning, and he

knew a wayside coffee-house where they would be sure to find someone going westwards. Reckon they'd be in time for the procession. No, he wouldn't fancy to be there himself. *He* didn't want no foreign kings—mark his words, Patria wouldn't never be the same after today. . . .

'That King Purple,' he said, 'I sort of got on with him. Never knew him personal, mind you, but—well, I'd give me old lorry to have him back. Hop up, then.'

They helped the king clamber into the back of the lorry, then scrambled up after him. There was nothing inside but tarpaulins, in which each made a nest for himself, and slept soundly until long after daybreak.

CHAPTER XXIV

DURING THE LAST days of the year picked units of King Decimal's army had been moving into Patria in preparation for the king's triumphal entry. There were soldiers on foot in their smartest uniforms, and soldiers on horseback on their smartest horses. On the first of January they would assemble in processional order outside the city, and on the word 'Go' they would strike up the band and accompany their sovereign in his march upon the palace.

They stayed overnight in a huge private mansion whose owner happened to be away. King Decimal and Queen Livia made themselves at home in the best rooms. The highest dignitaries struggled for the next-best, and so on down to the common soldiers, who found what comfort they could in attics, barns, stables and outhouses.

Early in the morning bugles summoned the soldiers to rise, to wash in cold water, and to spit-and-polish themselves to a high degree of glossiness. Likewise the horses were vigorously brushed and combed to within an inch of their lives, while beside them the coachboys laboured to put an extra shine on the state carriages.

Upstairs the king and queen were being made ready with more leisure. Maids-in-waiting, valets, dressmakers, tailors and hairdressers popped in and out, to give a pat here, a pull there, here a stitch and there a whisk, to their master and mistress.

'How do I look?' asked Queen Livia at last.

'Most expensive, my dear. And I?'

'Like an advertisement.'

They were feeling on top of the best possible world. All the arrangements were going well. There had been no delays, no accidents, no hitches—and no demonstrations by the foolish Patrians. The Patrians had, in fact, shown displeasure; but not in a rowdy or brickbatty way. They had merely turned their backs when the royal party drove by. Silly, ungrateful fools! But time would soon alter their attitude—or if not, they could always pass a law about it.

If the king's preparations could be considered elaborate, the attention being given to his horse, Ignatius, were scarcely less so. There wasn't a horsehair out of place; and with his mane curled and gaily festooned, his hocks bound with smart anklets, his saddle reflecting clearly (although comically) the groom's face, and his silver stirrups ringing in bell-like harmony when struck at the same time, he looked exactly what he was—a king's horse.

Too far away to be sure of arriving on time, King Purple, Florizel and Leo changed lorries at the coffee-

house on the main road. The new driver looked askance at such rough-looking wanderers, and Leo wasted several precious minutes pleading with him.

Then King Purple could bear it no more. 'I shall tell him,' he declared.

He could not be said to throw off his disguise, because there was nothing to throw off; it was all a part of him—his rough beard, his long hair, his worn face, his more worn clothes.

'You are hesitating over helping none other than your king!' he solemnly told the driver.

'Oh, *him*,' said the driver, '*he's* not my king.'

'No, not him—me. I am King Purple.'

'King Purple's dead. And I'm Christopher Columbus.'

'I am King Purple,' repeated the king, and this is Prince Florizel, and this my heroic jester Leo.'

He spoke with such seriousness that the driver looked anew from one to the other.

'King Purp——?' he exclaimed, stopping short with a gulp of surprise. 'Why, I do declare you have some look of him. Might be his elder brother if he had one. And the prince——' Hold my head, someone—pinch me; I'm dreaming! Come on, jump in, your royalties! Hang on to your crowns, we've some speeding to do!'

The procession advanced with precision. At the head, all alone, proud King Decimal rode his proud horse Ignatius. Horse and rider moved perfectly; there seemed to be absolute sympathy between them. Behind them Queen Livia rode in the state landau, drawn by six spanking stallions trotting in time. Then came the mounted guard, disdainfully looking down their noses at the few silent Patrians who hadn't meant to come but couldn't resist a parade. More carriages then, and a company of

foot-soldiers—marching more quickly than they enjoyed in order to keep up. Then the band, very brassy and booming, playing Prug marches to stir the breast. More cavalry, more foot-soldiers—and right at the end the king's private reporter, trying to look dignified on his fidgety horse and write notes at the same time. . . .

All other traffic ceased or slid into side streets at King Decimal's coming. The king wore a fixed smile which started out meaning to be pleasant, but had slipped into cruelty when he saw how the citizens purposely neglected him. Even Ignatius bared his teeth and showed the whites of his eyes.

Through a break in the buildings the king caught a glimpse of the roof of the palace. *My* palace, he thought, and occupied his mind by thinking of how he'd improve it and smarten it up. Ignatius was probably wondering what the stables were like.

The eyes of both king and horse gleamed for an instant as they swung round a bend and came face to face with the palace. From here on the road ran straight. They were nearly there. First, to pass through the gates and take formal possession—his advance messengers would have seen that everything was in order. Then the changing of the guard—his guard for old Purple's guard. The bugle would blow and up would go the Royal Standard of Prug, beside the bit of rag that Patria chose to call its flag—they'd abolish that altogether, soon enough. Then the banquet—and woe to the chef if he's over-peppered the turtle soup like he did last time! After that, a short nap, and the broadcast. 'Citizens of Patria, this is your new king addressing you. The forces of law have translated the crown and the kingdom of Patria into my hands . . .' and so on, and so on. . . . 'Our rule is both peaceful and

just; but remember this, at the slightest suggestion of disturbance or complaint we will swoop down with tooth and nail; hammer and tongs.' Finally, the open carriage drove through all the principal streets of Pelt, when the new king would show himself to the cheering millions—well, not exactly—the cheering thousands—well, if not that, there were bound to be a few....

King Purple had no need to tell the driver to hurry, for already the lorry felt as if something must surely burst. Faster than fairies, faster than witches they whistled and skimmed along the main road. The king sat in front holding on to his seat and his quite irreparable hat, clutching one first, then the other, with left hand and right, and at times both. Leo and Florizel bounced up and down in the back, sometimes leaving the floor altogether. Far from distressing them, the vigorous motion added to their excitement. They were back in their homeland and safe again, and Uncle Decimal was going to get the shock of his kingly career.

They screamed into Pelt's deserted streets with their hushed Sunday air, rattled loudly and importantly towards the palace, and caught up with the tail-end of the procession on its last lap.

'Quick—the side streets, the back entrance!' shouted King Purple.

The driver jerked his brakes, swung a short way in reverse, and shot round a corner. Right, left, right, right—treating the corners as if they weren't there—straight ahead; mind the lamp-post! and here is the side of the palace—yes, yes; right in there—the gate's open, don't mind the guards—stop!

'Wait here,' gasped the king, 'I'll reward you the moment I've finished. Leo, Florizel—come quickly!'

A guard with drawn sword came inquiringly up to the lorry.

'It's him,' said the driver hoarsely, 'King Purple!'

The guard stepped back off his balance.

'I want two things quickly,' the king was commanding him; 'a horse and a comb.'

This wasn't the king's usual self, but the guard recognized his master's voice. Saluting, he hurried away. 'King Purple's back, and the prince!' he called gleefully to all he passed.

They could hear the music drawing nearer.

'Oh quick, quick, *please!*' begged the king.

'Your Majesty,' panted the guard, 'it has several teeth missing, but it's the first I could find. They're bringing the horse.'

King Purple cast away his hat and feverishly combed his hair and beard into some shape. 'Do I look more regal?' he asked Florizel. 'Ah, the horse. Help me up, I'm ... so ... stiff. Now, Florizel, you jump behind me. We're going to welcome your precious uncle in proper style.'

Leo held the horse's head and looked up at the king. 'Best of luck!' he said rather chokily.

'Leo!' the king exclaimed—'Leo, my boy, what a mean wretch I am! I'd forgotten you for the moment. This moment belongs to you too. Here, you hop up behind Florizel—we'll get along somehow.'

The horse swayed a little before moving off with its heavy burden. The king guided it secretly along the side of the palace, until from the corner he could see the procession approaching.

'Now,' he said, 'when Decimal's the same distance from the gates as we are, we'll go forward and meet him there—Now!'

They say it was a magnificent sight, the meeting of the two kings. There were the palace gates, flanked by unwilling sentries, flung open to receive the king nobody wanted. Against the railings a few frightened-looking Patrians watched in the deepest gloom. The courtyard was empty, to give room to the hundreds of people attending His Majesty. Behind loomed the palace, looking shabbier than ever since it was to be handed to strangers. On the steps stood a number of high officials from Prug and from Patria.

That was the scene as King Decimal made to cross into King Purple's property.

Suddenly round the corner of the palace came three rough figures sharing a white horse. Was this a jest, or a deliberate insult to King Decimal? Who let those lunatics in? And—see, they are crossing the courtyard, making straight for the gates....

It was splendidly planned. The two kings met on the threshold of the palace grounds. Both stopped dead at the same time, facing each other. King Purple stared defiantly into King Decimal's eyes. The white horse glared understandingly into the eyes of Ignatius.

Then King Purple said in a loud clear voice:

'King Decimal, I presume?'

King Decimal started and turned ghastly white. He could neither think of a reply nor take his eyes off his cousin's face. Nor could the horse Ignatius, sharing the shame of his master.

'I—I—' King Decimal at last managed to gasp:
'I—'

There was an appalling clatter of sword, stirrups, hooves, horse and harness as King Decimal and Ignatius passed out in a swoon at King Purple's feet to lie muddled and still.



'I enjoyed that,' King Purple said, turning and trotting towards the palace.

What rejoicing there was then, what shoutings and cheerings as the news spread, what rushing into streets, what flinging out of flags! Was it really true? Pelt asked—the king *and* the prince? Where are the newspapers? Switch on the radio—that's not the right station. Here, let me do it . . .

'This is the Patrian Broadcasting System. In half an hour's time his Majesty King Purple will be broadcasting to Patria . . .'

'Just a brief message will do, sir,' said the official who had come to the palace originally to look after the non-plussed King Decimal's broadcast, 'Your Majesty must be very tired.'

Upstairs in his room Leo had had to lock the door against the swarm of people who wanted to congratulate him again. Bless them all—but he must bath and change. And in half an hour he was to join Queen Madge in her salon, with the two princesses and Florizel, and they were going to listen in comfort to the king's voice, originating from only a few rooms away.

Just in time he knocked at the queen's door, refreshed and in his best and gayest motley.

'Come in, dear boy,' cooed Queen Madge; and the princesses mobbed him and dragged him to their sofa.

'—in view of His Majesty's natural exhaustion,' the loudspeaker was saying, 'Patrians will not expect a long speech. Nevertheless even a minute will gladden the hearts of us all. His Majesty the King!'

'My people,' the king said. 'I am back again among you. After a series of horrible adventures a miraculous ending has come . . '

'It wasn't miraculous,' whispered Florizel, 'it was good old Leo!'

'Hush, Florizel,' said his mother. 'We want to listen.'

'... one man and one alone who was responsible for my safe return. Man, did I say?—he is little more than a boy, but a boy with a man's heart—a hero's heart. With uncommon courage and daring, single-handed he plotted and executed my escape and the escape of my son Prince Florizel.'

The king's voice was thick with emotion.

'That boy', he went on, 'may not be known to many of you outside the palace. He will be from now on. His name is Leo . . .'

Leo felt tingles creeping up his spine and bursting like fireworks against the top of his skull. On either side of him Albina and Amnesia squeezed his arms and patted his hands. Queen Madge looked on with sweet approval.

A lady-in-waiting crept in on tiptoe.

'The dowager queen wishes a word with Leo, ma'am.'

'With me?' Leo asked.

The lady-in-waiting nodded.

'Very well,' said Queen Madge. 'Off you go, Leo, and see what she wants. The king must be nearly done by now.'

Leo followed the lady-in-waiting to Queen's Gertrude's boudoir. The old queen sat in the middle of the room, almost hidden by the enormous tapestry at which she had been stitch-stitch-stitching since time forgotten.

'Come in, Leo, come in,' she said, in a screwed-up sort of voice; 'I did send for you. Don't be surprised. Come in.'

Leo found it hard not to be surprised, since he had had nothing to do with the dowager queen before.

'Sit down there,' she invited him, pointing to a slender



gilded chair with a needleworked seat. 'Welcome back, dear boy,' she said; 'tell me things.' She had taken off her tortoiseshell glasses, and proceeded to put away the needles and wools she worked with.

It was restful in the boudoir. Leo relaxed as far as the chair would allow, and recounted their adventures to the dowager queen.

'It sounds like a story-book,' she said at the end; 'an adventure story. Oh, that I had the time to put it all down! I'd leave nothing unsaid that I felt should be said. Ourselves—the royal family—our funny and sometimes *difficult* ways. My dear son Purple—he would be human as well as a king, and *terribly* crotchety sometimes. Poor dear Madge, with her sour disposition—and she *is* sour at times, you know. The two girls, rowdy and bouncy, and getting too big for it now; but such *kind* girls at heart. Florizel, my *dear* Florizel—for I'm *so* very fond of him; he's so terribly important to me as *well* as to Patria; and I *did* miss him so, although now I think the adventure may have done him *good*; perhaps he was kept *too* much at home, like a hothouse plant. . . .

'All that would come into my book, Leo. There'd even be a line or two about *me*, a useless and doting old queen whom everyone tolerates because she was once Queen of Patria and sat on the golden throne. Perhaps I'd say a *kind* word about her, because I know her so well. I *might* even suggest that she wasn't such a stupid old body as she looked. . . .

'But it would be your book, Leo, *your* story. The story of how an unknown lad came to the court of King Purple as King Purple's Jester, and saved the kingdom from a usurper. One day, if someone takes the trouble to look into the facts, such a book may be written. . . .'

The dowager queen smiled and sleepily closed her eye-

lids. Leo rose very softly, suddenly aware that here was a new, ever-after friend.

'Your Majesty——' he said shyly.

'Yes, Leo?'

'Your Majesty—ma'am—may I kiss you?'

The dowager queen's eyelids flickered as Leo lightly kissed her on the forehead. He knew she was pleased, for her clawlike hand gave his a squeeze. Then he scuttled away before he should feel too embarrassed. . . .

Through a door close at hand he could hear a voice coming from a radio. He paused and placed an ear to the door. Goodness gracious, the king was still at it!

'Imagine,' he heard, 'what it feels like to hang all night from a tree. It's horrible! Every time the wind blows you sway back and forth—this way, that way, ding, dong, ding!' King Purple had put aside his official voice, and was chatting away with easy informality. 'Anyway, hour after hour I hung there, like an apple on a piece of string, wondering if the branches would suddenly break and drop me like . . . like—well, like an apple dropping off a piece of string . . .'

Leo smiled very widely and crept away to find something to eat.

All afternoon and evening people gathered in the streets hoping King Purple would drive among them. The greengrocers' shops had been besieged by customers wishing to exchange for flowers and greenery the rotten vegetables they had bought to cast at King Decimal's retinue. More and more flags had been discovered in attics and trunks; paper decorations left over from Christmas were hung in the streets.

In the late darkness a vast crowd poured towards the palace to clamour for a sight of the newly returned. All

eyes were turned up towards the balcony, behind which figures passed to and fro in the light of many chandeliers.

Suddenly from several sides floodlights were trained on the palace. The crowd cheered expectantly. 'It's him.' 'No it isn't.' 'Here he is—here they all are!' 'No, not yet.' 'Now, here they come!'

The crowd roared its loudest as the king and queen appeared on the balcony. Then Florizel popped up, and the princesses sidled along to their side. Bow, wave, bow; then they retired. Another roar, and they came out again.

From the shelter of a curtain Leo could see over the balcony a portion of the crowd. Behind the floodlights they looked shapeless and dark, and their voices were as the waves of the sea. 'Vivat Rex!' he could hear: 'Long live the Prince!'

The king retired from the balcony into the room. He was mopping his brow, but looking as pleased as pleased. The rest of the family followed, blinking their eyes after facing the floodlights.

'What a highly successful performance!' laughed Florizel. He dug Leo playfully in the ribs. 'Why don't you come out too, like Daddy suggests?'

Leo shrugged his shoulders. 'I'd feel out of place,' he said.

But now the crowd had taken up a new shout. At first it could not be distinguished; then the queen turned to Leo. 'Can't you hear them?' she asked.

'Leo, Leo!' Yes, they were calling for him. 'We want Leo! Leo! Leo!'

'Out you go,' said King Purple, holding the curtain aside with the nearest to a wink that had ever been seen in his eye.

Leo stumbled on to the balcony. The lights picked out the colours of his motley and dazzled him completely. He

heard the crowd shouting his name, somewhere there where the courtyard ended. Then his eyes adjusted themselves to the brightness and he could see movements among the dark masses of people; the waving of hands, the flurry of flags and rolled-up newspapers.

It was a funny feeling, standing alone high above the crowd and being liked by them all. He felt partly aglow with fiery prickles, and partly a little bit sick from excitement. He wanted to shout back at them and say thank you; but they wouldn't have heard.

Instead he waved once, and retired into the palace.

'Can I, please, Mr. King,' he asked, 'stay with you always?'

ENDPIECE

THE REST OF the story you may know already from the Patrian snippets which get into the newspapers from time to time. How not so very much later Prince Florizel married the beautiful Prince Acquarita, who presented to Patria three sons in a row (the first Royal triplets in history) and so made sure that the crown would remain in the family hands. How Leo was offered a high post at court, but preferred the distinction of remaining the Only Court Jester in the World. How King Decimal of Prug, in a fit of remorse brought on by a nearly fatal illness, abdicated the throne and retired as plain Mr. Decimal to an island off Italy. How the township of Tritten subscribed for a statue to her Most Illustrious Son (whom they nicknamed 'The Great') to which every single inhabitant contributed. . . .

And if ever you visit the orphanage at Tritten (and, indeed, if ever you visit Tritten at all you will be glad to find *something* to see there) take this book with you. You see, there's a chance that Leo himself may be there (he often goes down for a day or two to amuse the orphans), and I know he'd be delighted to write his name in it.

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